

Dominican Republic: Chambers of Horror

By: TIME

Adapted by Fishtank Staff

- 1 In the 4½ months since the last of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's family departed, thousands of Dominicans previously silenced by terror have come forward to describe the crimes of the dead dictator's secret police, his army and personal goon squads. Last week Dominican Attorney General Eduardo Antonio Garcia Vasquez, who investigated the stories, reported a preliminary toll: known murders plus those missing and presumed dead come to 5,700 in the past five years. The total for the Trujillo regime's full 31 years may run to the tens of thousands.
- 2 Justice has been slow in coming to the Dominican Republic. Of the several thousand members of Trujillo's dread S.I.M. (Military Intelligence Service), only a handful are under arrest; not one has been tried. The rest have either been permitted to slip into exile or are openly walking the streets; some are still on active duty.
- 3 The reason is not hard to find. Though President Rafael Donnelly's seven-man Council of State has been installed to guide the country toward democracy, it operates under a shaky truce with the still powerful military that remains from Trujillo's time. In plain language the council is afraid to anger the trigger-happy officers by searching out the killers in their ranks. Says an official of the council: "Lots of military men are implicated. You know where we would end up if we pressed too hard."
- 4 Nine & Forty. The civilian council may find itself forced to act before long as more and more of the Trujillos' grisly secrets are put before the public. Attorney General Garcia Vasquez reports that two of the busiest murder factories were located in the capital's environs—"La Carenta" (The Forty), so-called because it was on 40th Street in Santo Domingo, and "Kilometer Nine," beside a highway nine kilometers east of the capital. Both were run by the S.I.M., and both were equipped with relatively unsophisticated but highly effective torture instruments. One device was an electric chair used both for shocking and for slow electrocution.
- 5 Survivors know it was slow because the P.A. system blared the victims' screams throughout the cell blocks. A variant was the Pulpo (Octopus), a many-armed electrical device attached by means of small screws inserted into the skull. Trujillo's men also employed a rubber "collar" that could be tightened enough to sever a man's head, an 18-in. electrified rod ("the Cane") for shocking the genitals, nail extractors, leather-thonged whips, small rubber hammers, scissors for castration.

- 6 "Burned Alive." Sometimes the dictator himself took a hand in the proceedings. Carlos M. Nolasco, a former sergeant implicated in a 1959 air force conspiracy, tells of Trujillo's arriving one night at Nine to deal with eight officers arrested after the plot was broken. Says Nolasco: "The tyrant ordered the compromised officers burned alive." Other survivors tell of a ferocious murder binge immediately after Trujillo's assassination by a band of gunmen last May. Literally scores of people were horribly tortured and killed. Among the victims: General Rene Roman Fernandez, an in-law of Trujillo and secretary of the armed forces, who was suspected of playing a role in the plot. S.I.M. agents took the general to Nine, where he was left for days with his eyelids stitched to his eyebrows; he was then beaten with baseball bats, drenched with acid, exposed to swarms of angry ants, shocked repeatedly in the electric chair, and finally put out of his misery with 56 submachinegun slugs.
- 7 What eventually happened to the bodies is still largely a mystery. Only a few were handed back to relatives. The majority, investigators believe, were tossed to sharks, or were stuffed into an incinerator at nearby San Isidro airbase. Almost every day, pathetic appeals are made asking information about the disappearance of a brother, a sister, a parent. The air force has repeatedly refused the attorney general permission to look into the incinerator.
- 8 All the while, public outrage mounts. In the north coast town of Puerto Plata last week, news spread that two former Trujillo secret police agents were about to flee to Haiti aboard a Dominican freighter. Before long an angry crowd had gathered at the dock, hurling stones at the ship, screaming for the pair to be handed over. An army unit arrived, took the men from the ship to the local garrison. The mob followed, still protesting, and the soldiers reacted in familiar Dominican fashion—a burst of machine-gun fire killed one man and wounded three. Next day, in the city of Santiago, another crowd shouting "The assassins must be punished!" was dispersed by bullets, with two wounded. In Santo Domingo, the capital, night raiders revenged themselves by shooting from speeding cars at policemen, killing one and wounding two.
- 9 But no one thought that would be revenge enough.