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BOLIVIA

Accusing Hands

In the melodrama that followed Che Guevara's death in October 1967, no role was more bizarre than that of a bit player named Antonio Arguedas, 41, a former Bolivian Interior Minister. By his own account, Arguedas smuggled a copy of Guevara's diary out of Bolivia and into Fidel Castro's hands, then fled his country to avoid arrest. He has been involved in a cat-and-mouse struggle with Bolivian authorities ever since.

Arguedas was coaxed back to La Paz by the late President René Barrientos. In no time, Arguedas found himself on trial for "treason and espionage." Out on bail, he survived three attempts on his life. Last July he took refuge in the Mexican embassy in La Paz, and he is still there.

Adolfo Siles, who became President after Barrientos was killed in a helicopter crash, wanted to allow Arguedas to go into exile, but the military vetoed the idea. The generals' most bizarre but compelling argument was that Arguedas had possession of Guevara's severed hands. Che's hands had been preserved in formaldehyde and examined in La Paz by fingerprint experts. Nobody is sure what became of them after that. Even if they have not been destroyed, the hands could serve no further legal purpose—but they might have an enduring sentimental or superstitious value. The generals were concerned that Arguedas might have hidden the hands as well as certain tape recordings, which indicate that Che had been executed by the Bolivian armed forces, not killed in battle, as the Bolivians claimed.

Before Siles could settle the matter, the generals overthrew him. Now they are hinting that Arguedas was involved in the cocaine trade. If so, said President Alfredo Ovando Candia last week, this would "complicate Arguedas' situation." To be exact, it would subject Arguedas to a criminal trial, making him ineligible for political asylum and perhaps ensuring that his tapes and those carefully preserved hands would remain permanently out of sight.