

Former British PM Thatcher calls for Pinochet's release

Our correspondent
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Ex-Conservative prime minister Baroness Thatcher has written to the *Times* of London newspaper demanding that former dictator Augusto Pinochet to be allowed to return to Chile. She describes the general, who presided over the execution of thousands of his left-wing opponents, in glowing terms.

'I have better cause than most to remember that Chile, led at that time by General Pinochet, was a good friend to this country during the Falklands War,' writes Thatcher in her letter dated October 21. She attributes abuses of human rights and violence to 'both sides of the political divide', which 'successively elected democratic Governments' in Chile have sought to deal with. 'An essential part of that process has been the settlement of the status of General Pinochet and it is not for Spain, Britain or any other country to interfere in what is an internal matter for Chile. Delicate balances have had to be struck in Chile's transition to democracy, balances with which we interfere at our peril.'

Thatcher concludes by explaining, 'Next week, Britain will welcome the democratically elected leader of a country which illegally invaded British territory, [Argentinean President Carlos Menem] causing the loss of more than 250 British lives. It would be disgraceful to preach reconciliation with one, while maintaining under arrest someone who, during that same conflict, did so much to save so many British lives.'

Thatcher is presently on a lecture tour of the United States. Her letter was published in the *Times* because of the Murdoch-owned paper's leading role in championing Pinochet. A separate article waxes indignant at a delegation of right-wing Chilean Opposition politicians having been kept waiting in the hallway of the Home Office by Ken Sutton, the principal private secretary to Home Secretary Jack

Straw. This is described as 'rank and unwarranted discourtesy', a 'political gesture' which has 'blown a hole in the Government's argument that the arrest of General Pinochet is a strictly legal matter in which politics has and should have no role.'

The Murdoch chain of newspapers, which includes Britain's most popular daily the *Sun*, played a key role in the election of New Labour by switching their support from the Conservatives in last May's General Election. They are now seeking to use their influence to encourage an intervention on behalf of Pinochet by Prime Minister Blair himself. The *Times* writes that Blair 'would now be foolish to continue to stonewall, pretending that this case is nothing more than the automatic consequence of 'two legal systems united by an extradition treaty'.' They warn him that 'broader strategic arguments of peace, stability and democracy in Chile and Latin America should carry most weight. Mr Blair should take a political risk and cut the Gordian knot.'

The *Times*' supposed concern with the preservation of democracy in Chile is belied by its admission that the military still decides what is permissible, and is ready to take over once again if it feels its interests threatened. The paper explains that Pinochet's detention has 'violently reopened the country's wounds' and 'could bring Chile's military back out of barracks'.

Pinochet remains a key behind-the-scenes defender of the interests of big business in Latin America, including those of British imperialism. The *Times* details the help he provided to Thatcher's 1982 military adventure against Argentina as having 'provided a crucial base for the SAS and detailed intelligence about Argentine military preparations.'

Other newspapers have commented more fully, explaining that Pinochet allowed British warplanes to

use Chilean airbases and even repainted them in Chilean Air Force colours. A former Special Air Service officer, Ken Conner, told the *Guardian* on Monday that SAS troops were allowed to spy on Argentinean airfields from Chile.

Mario Artaza, Chile's ambassador to London, hinted at other contemporary considerations shaping the concerns of Thatcher and the *Times*. He said that medical treatment was not the only reason for Pinochet's trip to London. The general, according to Chilean sources, including Pinochet himself, was on a 'special mission' when he was arrested. As in previous years, he was negotiating an arms contract, including the possible purchase of two frigates from British companies.

See also:

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[21 October 1998]



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