

Pinochet arrest sparks diplomatic crisis

Our reporter
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Acting on a warrant originating in Spain, British police arrested General Augusto Pinochet at the London Clinic last Friday night, shortly after he underwent an emergency back operation. His arrest has sparked a diplomatic crisis embroiling Britain, Spain, Chile and America.

The *Guardian* newspaper on Tuesday wrote: 'The United States is understood to be making behind-the-scenes overtures for the general not to be extradited to Spain to face charges of torture and genocide for fear of what might emerge about the US role in the coup that brought him to power.' Highlighting the central role played by America in the 1973 military putsch, the *Guardian* continued, 'The US was instrumental in providing advisors to assist Gen. Pinochet before and after his coup and in the subsequent 'counter-subversive' role. There were around 400 American 'advisers' assisting Gen. Pinochet.'

The Chilean dictator's visit to the UK was made with the full knowledge and sanction of the Labour government. The British ambassador in Santiago, Gwynne Evans, was informed of the trip long in advance. Pinochet travelled to Britain using a diplomatic passport and was given VIP treatment when he arrived at the London airport. A statement from his solicitor claimed that 'permission for him to enter and stay in this country was stamped in his diplomatic passport. Over recent years General Pinochet has travelled without hindrance to the UK on several occasions with the approval of Her Majesty's Government.'

General Pinochet was a regular visitor to Britain and often met with Margaret Thatcher. He was a frequent guest of arms and defence manufacturers who were eager to sell their wares. In 1994, British Aerospace staged a special demonstration of their rocket launchers for his benefit and the National Army Museum received him with honours. He was entertained for a week by British Aerospace again in 1995, after they clinched a big contract with the Chilean defence firm Famea.

An official entry in the Chilean embassy logbook records his October 1997 visit to Britain. This occurred

during the Labour Party conference and involved ongoing contracts with UK defence manufacturers, which he established as commander-in-chief of the Chilean armed forces. In an interview with the *New Yorker* magazine last week, Pinochet said the present visit was one of his 'regular trips' to Britain. He indicated that he was in the country as Chile's 'armed forces purchaser'.

The arrest appears to have come as a surprise to both the British and Spanish administrations. Avoiding any direct reference to Pinochet's record as a brutal dictator, a spokesman for Prime Minister Tony Blair's Downing Street office said, 'It is a legal process being followed and will continue to be followed.' Home Secretary Jack Straw took a similar line, saying, 'I will act on this as on any other matter, in a quasi-judicial way. I will act on the facts of the case.'

Spanish Foreign Minister Abel Matutes said, 'this is a judicial decision and the Spanish government will always respect the rulings of the courts.'

News of the arrest came during the Ibero-American summit in Oporto, attended by Spanish Prime Minister Aznar alongside Chilean President Eduardo Frei. The Chilean government immediately lodged an official complaint against Pinochet's detention, claiming he enjoys diplomatic immunity. In Santiago, violent pro-Pinochet demonstrations have been held outside the British embassy.

The present crisis was sparked when, earlier last week, two Spanish judges, Baltasar Garzon and Manuel Garcia Castellon, contacted the British authorities asking to question Pinochet. Castellon said he wished to interview Pinochet in connection with the torture and disappearance of Spanish citizens following the 1973 coup. Garzon is conducting an inquiry into human rights violations in Chile and Argentina. On October 14 the judges contacted INTERPOL in Madrid, who liaised with their British counterparts, after which a warrant was issued for Pinochet to be detained.

The bloody coup, which occurred 25 years ago last month, overthrew the Popular Unity government of

Salvador Allende. British-made Hawker Hunter jets bombed the presidential palace, where Allende was killed. American money and CIA 'advisors' were central to ensuring Pinochet's success. The army, police and fascist gangs murdered at least 3,000 people on the day of the coup alone. Thousands more were herded into makeshift concentration camps where mass torture and executions took place. The killings continued throughout the 17 years of Pinochet's rule. From a population of only 10 million, at least 50,000 political opponents were murdered.

Foreign corporations were given back property nationalised under Allende. Chile became a testing ground for ruthless monetarist and free market economics, a model since followed in London, Madrid and Washington. Pinochet was admired by Margaret Thatcher. He supported Britain in its war against Argentina over the Malvinas.

Press reports now refer to the 'democratic' conditions established in Chile after Pinochet stepped down in 1990. However, the military apparatus continues to exercise great power and a 1978 law grants them immunity for crimes committed under the dictatorship. Pinochet enjoys personal immunity from prosecution in Chile as a senator-for-life, under a special clause in the constitution. He only relinquished his post as commander-in-chief this year, handing it over to one of his handpicked cronies.

The insistence of the British and Spanish governments that the 'Pinochet affair' is purely a judicial matter reveals the cynicism of bourgeois politics. In Britain, a hasty remark made by Minister Peter Mandelson, that Pinochet was 'a brutal dictator', was quickly countered by Cabinet sources who called his words 'unhelpful and emotional'.

Imperialist governments in America and Europe are highly selective in their condemnation of dictatorial regimes and international human rights violators. The arrest of Pinochet, a mass murderer brought to power with the aid of the US and supported by the 'democratic' West, has further exposed their hypocrisy. They denounce Saddam Hussein and Muammar Ghaddafi as monsters who should be ostracised, if not bombed into extinction, and demand war crimes trials for political opponents such as Karadzic in Bosnia. But military strongmen, like Indonesia's Suharto and Chile's Pinochet, who defend Western investments by drowning working class opposition in blood, are regarded as valued and trusted allies.

Those who suffered under the years of Chilean dictatorship have welcomed the actions of the Spanish judges, hoping to see one of Latin America's tyrants

brought to book for his crimes. At the same time, many democratic-minded people are rightly sceptical that justice can be expected from a system that feted Pinochet, benefited from his expenditure on military hardware and profited from the opening up of Chile as a source of cheap labour for the transnational corporations.

The Spanish authorities must present their grounds for extradition within the next 40 days. The initial hearing will take place at London's Bow Street Magistrates Court. Pinochet has said he will strenuously oppose any case against him, which he can appeal through the courts as far as the House of Lords. The final decision, however, will rest with Home Secretary Jack Straw. If at any stage Pinochet's diplomatic status is upheld, he will be free to return to Chile.

The arrest and its consequences reveal the underlying tensions and crises that grip ruling circles everywhere. The extradition proceedings disrupt diplomatic and political relationships both across the Atlantic and within Europe. A public trial for his actions in 1973 and afterwards could threaten to unleash a broader social movement against those in Chile who have gone unpunished. Washington cannot look favourably at interference in what it traditionally regards as its 'backyard' in Latin America--especially if it exposes US involvement in the 1973 coup and the terrible conditions that followed. Pinochet's detention has sparked off a train of events that could prove difficult to control.

See also:

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