

Crisis mounts over Pinochet arrest

Our reporter
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The Spanish and British governments have both declared that any decision on the extradition and possible prosecution of former Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet rests entirely with the judicial system of the two countries. Both Madrid and London are anxious to conceal past connections with Pinochet, preserve relations with Chile and avoid provoking the ire of the US, which played the key role in preparing Pinochet's 1973 coup.

In Spain, the conservative government of José Marie Aznar indicated it would not block extradition of Pinochet to Spain if the courts formally requested it. 'The government is waiting for the judicial authorities to decide definitively if the extradition should proceed before it sends [the request to London],' Foreign Minister Abel Matutes said.

One of the two judges who sought Pinochet's arrest, Manuel Castellon, has handed over all of his files to fellow judge Baltasar Garzon. The latter initially accused Pinochet of culpability in the killing or disappearance of 94 people. Castellon's files could add 4,000 names to the list.

The Spanish National Court will rule next week on whether Garzon may proceed with his extradition request. Eduardo Fungarino, Chief Prosecutor at the National Court, sought to undermine Garzon's case, stating, 'We think that these crimes should be judged in the countries where they took place, or in an international tribunal, but not here.'

If Garzon fails, the British government would have to decide whether to bring a case against Pinochet. Leading spokesmen for the government, including Prime Minister Tony Blair, have been anxious to distance themselves from any prosecution.

Blair told the *Times* newspaper his government had played no part in the decision to arrest Pinochet. 'The judicial process has been undertaken by a Spanish magistrate applying through Interpol to the

Metropolitan Police here,' he said. Home Secretary Jack Straw would be involved later in the process in a 'quasi-judicial role', not as a politician. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook also ruled out any government intervention in the extradition proceedings. 'The legal system is totally separate from the government. Government institutions have no right to put pressure on courts,' he said.

The Blair government has denied any behind-the-scenes pressure from the United States. The Foreign Office and Home Office yesterday insisted it had received no official US contact. This was in response to press comments like that in the *Independent*: 'It seems that the United States is ready to exert pressure on behalf of its former client, so that their role in his crimes will not be revealed.'

The Chilean government has mounted a campaign to secure Pinochet's release. A senior official from the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs has arrived in London to fight extradition. Seven Chilean members of parliament from two right-wing opposition parties, Renovacion Nacional and Union Democratica Independiente, visited Pinochet in hospital. They scolded the Blair government, declaring the arrest of Pinochet to be an unwarranted interference in Chilean affairs. The delegation was led by Angelica Christi, who said the arrest was the result of a left-wing conspiracy.

The Chilean delegation made a beeline for their friends and allies in the Conservative [Tory] Party. Their case was put to the Tory peer Lord Norman Lamont, former Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Thatcher government. Other leading Tories have stepped forward to defend Pinochet. Sir Charles Powell, Thatcher's former Foreign Policy advisor, described Pinochet as a key ally during Britain's 1982 war against Argentina over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands. 'Chile under Pinochet was a strong ally during

the war. We would not have got to where we did--winning it--without his help. Chile was enormously helpful both overtly and covertly.'

Yesterday a spokesman for Baroness Thatcher called suggestions that she frequently had tea with Pinochet in London 'somewhat exaggerated'. He acknowledged, however, that Thatcher had dined with the former dictator on October 5, just 11 days before his arrest last Friday.

The situation is further complicated for the Blair government by efforts to bring about a prosecution of Pinochet in Britain under the 1988 Criminal Justice Act, which incorporates the 1984 Convention against Torture. This obliges a prosecution against those who commit torture, wherever it took place.

These moves are being led by several human rights organisations, including Amnesty International, Redress Trust and the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, as well as the family of William Beausire, a British citizen who disappeared in Chile in 1975. Helen Bamber, the director of the Medical Foundation, which helps more than 2,000 torture victims at its treatment centre, said: 'We see regularly about 25 victims of the Pinochet regime now living in Britain, whose sufferings range from physical pain as a result of the injuries inflicted on them to psychological torment from the memories they cannot banish.'

Chile Democratico, a human rights group, has called for Pinochet to be put on trial for complicity in the torture or killing of at least 24 British citizens. The British group, Chileans in Exile, also announced plans to bring a private prosecution. The All-Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group has backed these calls and is seeking an urgent meeting with the Attorney General, John Morris.

The British press is split down the middle. Those papers supporting the Tories, such as the *Daily Telegraph*, and former pro-Tory papers such as the *Times* are seeking to defend Pinochet's 'diplomatic immunity' and conceal the extent of his crimes. In contrast, the *Guardian* and the *Independent* continue to feature articles on Pinochet's repression and the complicity of the CIA.

The *Independent* led yesterday with an interview with Adam Schesch, an American detained in Santiago's National Stadium for 10 days during Pinochet's coup against the Allende government. It was there that the

army took thousands of oppositionists and left-wingers to be tortured or killed.

'There were two lines,' recalled Schesch. 'We called them the line of life and the line of death. One line led out, away from the stadium, the other led inside.... The demeanour of people in the one line seemed relaxed. The people in the other line were heavily guarded. They seemed stunned, stolid-faced. We never saw those people again....'

'It was not genocide but 'politicide', what he was doing. He was trying to wipe out the leadership of a whole generation of the working class.'

The *Independent* commented that Schesch was eventually released because friends put pressure on the American State Department to intervene. 'There had been reluctance, possibly because--as recently released documents show--the CIA acting under President Richard Nixon was deeply involved in promoting the coup.'

See also:

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