

Tensions mounts in Chile after Britain rejects call for Pinochet's immediate release

Vicky Short
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The Chilean government responded to the October 8 decision by Bow Street Magistrates Court Judge Ronald Bartle to allow former dictator Augusto Pinochet to be extradited to Spain by once more appealing to the British government to intervene. On October 14, it sent a letter to Home Secretary Jack Straw requesting that the extradition process be halted and Pinochet freed on health grounds. This follows an earlier letter from Chilean President Eduardo Frei to Prime Minister Blair on October 7, the contents of which have not been disclosed.

The Blair government replied that it would not take action until court proceedings against Pinochet were over. A Downing Street spokeswoman said, "It's not for us to be involved in this at all." Under British law, both the courts and the Home Secretary must approve extradition. This allows Straw to block an extradition on "humanitarian grounds" such as ill health, but only after the appeals process is exhausted.

Though the Blair government would like nothing better than to wash its hands of Pinochet, a decision to do so would provoke an angry response in Chile, Britain and Spain. Workers in Chile, and Pinochet's victims and their relatives in particular, have been encouraged by the Socialist Party and the Communist Party to stake their demands for justice on the British legal system. Interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site* immediately following Bartle's ruling, Mireya García of the Association of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared said, "I am sure that Mr. Straw will respect this judicial verdict." Berta Manrique of the Association of Executed Political Prisoners in Chile said, "Mr. Straw is an honourable man, he respects the law and has shown he is with us." If such hopes were dashed, then the Chilean government would face the political fallout.

The October 16 anniversary of Pinochet's arrest saw a 5,000-strong anti-Pinochet demonstration in Santiago. Supporters of the dictator responded with a counter-protest. Eight arrests were made of those seeking access to the British and Spanish embassies. The press had earlier reported plans by activists from the pro-Pinochet *Patria y Libertad* to attack the British and Spanish embassies. On the day of Bartle's verdict, the British government's honorary consul in the Chilean port city of Valparaíso resigned and went into hiding after receiving death threats. Later that same week, the offices of two Spanish banking and telecommunications companies were firebombed in the northern city of Coquimbo.

Despite the political dangers involved, Pinochet's right-wing allies internationally are stepping up their campaign to free him. On October 10, Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State and National Security Adviser to President Richard Nixon, called the case against Pinochet an "aberration". He added that it should not be left in the hands of "individual judges with their own political agendas" to administer "justice in such sensitive subjects", insisting that Pinochet should be tried by "an international tribunal or the Chilean courts". Last Tuesday, tapes of White House conversations were declassified confirming that Kissinger was the staunchest advocate of US participation in Pinochet's coup. In Britain, former Conservative Party Chancellor Lord Lamont called Labour's refusal to intervene "bogus legalism and the misrule of law".

See Also:

British court rules Pinochet extradition to Spain can proceed
[9 October 1999]

"For us it is hard and inexplicable that this Chilean

government is defending Pinochet so strongly"

*Interview with the president of the Association of
Relatives of Executed Political Prisoners in Chile*

[8 October 1999]

Chile and the arrest of Pinochet

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