How the social democrats came to the aid of Pinochet

Our Reporter
30 August 2001

Augusto Pinochet: 503 Days Trapped in London (*Augusto Pinochet: 503 Días Atrapado en Londres*)
By Mónica Pérez and Felipe Gerdtzen
Editorial Los Andes, Santiago de Chile
ISBN 956-7849-14-5

Augusto Pinochet: 503 Dias Atrapado en Londres was published in Chile last October in a very limited edition. It documents the behind-the-scenes manoeuvres between the governments of Chile, Spain and Britain to ensure that the former dictator was not extradited to Spain to face trial for crimes against humanity. Representatives of the Chilean Socialist Party and their counterparts in the Labour government in Britain played a leading role in these sordid arrangements.

Pinochet was arrested by Scotland Yard on October 16, 1998, on an extradition warrant issued by Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzón, as he was recovering from an operation in a London clinic. The warrant sought to bring charges against Pinochet for the murder or "disappearance" of more than 3,100 Chileans and foreigners during the military coup he led in 1973 and his subsequent 17-year dictatorship. However he was released on March 3, 2000 on the grounds that he was too old, ill and mentally unfit to stand trial.

Pinochet's coup had been prepared in collaboration with the American CIA. It overthrew the democratically elected government of Primer Minister Salvador Allende's Socialist Party. Subsequently tens of thousands of Pinochet's left-wing opponents in the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and other radical groups—intellectuals, workers and peasants—were rounded up, held in concentration camps, tortured and murdered. Later the notorious Operation Condor was mounted, during which Pinochet collaborated with other Latin American dictatorships such as those in Brazil and Argentina to hunt down refugees, kidnap and murder them. His victims included Britons, Americans and other foreign nationals and his crimes extended as far as Washington where Allende's Minister of Defence and Foreign Affairs, Orlando Letelier, was assassinated.

503 Days was written by two journalists, Mónica Pérez (35) and Felipe Gerdtzen (30), engaged by Chilean National Television to cover the extradition proceedings in London. Several chapters deal with new and revealing data, showing the secret agreements arrived at between the British and Chilean governments, with the blessing and help of the Spanish government, which eventually led to the decision by British Home Secretary Jack Straw in March 2000 to release Pinochet.

Details are given of the exhaustive legal attempts made by the three countries to secure Pinochet's release. When it became clear that victory would not be achieved in the courts, however, the Chilean government opted for a political solution. His release was finally carried out under the cover of humanitarian concerns on "compassionate grounds", arguing that he was too frail to stand trial, thus blocking extradition requests from Spain, France, Belgium and Switzerland.

The fact that three governments of such apparent diverse political coloration as Tony Blair's Labour Party, Eduardo Frei's Christian Democrat/Socialist coalition and Aznar's right wing conservatives, were agreed on the need to avoid a public trial of the dictator at all costs is worth pondering. The actions of the Chilean right and their Spanish counterparts are not hard to fathom. One came out of the same ruling elite that spawned Pinochet, the other out of Franco's fascist movement. Both were in power due to a similar "peaceful transition" to civilian rule, which had ensured that no political reckoning was made with the representatives of the previous dictatorships.

What is more revealing is the reliance of the right wing on the social democrats to get their man off the hook and the depths to which Pinochet's professed opponents, and in many cases even his victims, were prepared to stoop in order to avoid a public trial. Historically, they all had reasons to fear the contemporary implications of an exposure of the role of the CIA and others in backing Pinochet's coup. Britain, for example, was one of the first countries to recognise the military junta, eleven days after the coup, and has supplied Chile with armaments ever since. For the Chilean social democrats, to dredge up the past would endanger their present political and economic alliance with the US, which involves seeking admission to the North American Free Trade Agreement. But more fundamental still is their fear of the impact on class relations of a trial that would inevitably polarise Chilean society and undermine workers' illusions in the country's supposed democracy.

The book details all the legal procedures and counter-procedures that were gone through in order to prevent Pinochet's extradition through the courts. The supporters of Pinochet, including the Frei government, at first would not contemplate anything other than a judicial victory. But after months of trying the diplomatic channels in Spain, all they had achieved was the assurance that were Britain to decide to send Pinochet home the Spanish government would not appeal against it.

Labour's collaboration with the Chilean government

The authors insist that it was the private contacts between Chile's President Frei and Britain's Prime Minister Blair—above the heads of the judiciary—that opened the door through which Pinochet would eventually walk free.

According to the authors, Frei had several telephone discussions with Blair. The first one was in January 1999, three months after the arrest of Pinochet and unofficial contact was made throughout the extradition process. There was never any public acknowledgement of these contacts.

The first crucial conversation lasted half an hour. Frei urged Blair to consider the high risk he was assuming were Pinochet to die in London and the consequences this would have for both countries. He also assured him that there were processes being followed in Chile against Pinochet

© World Socialist Web Site

and even if the General was returned for health reasons, he would have to face justice in his own country. Both leaders went on to create parallel means of communication. Blair said to Frei that he had no capacity to intervene in the judicial process. He confessed to Frei that the arrest of Pinochet had come as a surprise for him, and that even if there had been a perception in public opinion and the media that there had been a political decision made, this was not the case. The claim by former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that he could intervene in judicial decisions was not accurate, he insisted. The final decision rested with Home Secretary Jack Straw.

But Blair left options open, according to the authors. In reported speech—which they do not explain how they got hold of—they claim Blair told Frei: "I'll see what I can do, but only under the following conditions: nothing of this conversation can be made public. If the media publishes anything about this they will put me in a very complicated situation which I would find difficult to manage. I accept the sending of two people who have your absolute confidence to analyse the details, particularly the lawsuits pending against Pinochet. Our statutes contemplate humanitarian provisions. We would have to look at them, but under the strictest confidentiality. This must not be interpreted as me giving any guarantees, because I cannot give them."

Frei and his closest advisers understood that behind these words there was a will to find a political solution.

According to the authors, the British asked for patience and prudence on the part of the Chileans, so that it could never be suspected that political negotiations were taking place. They demanded first of all that the contacts between the governments would be spaced out and never coincide with any of the judicial proceedings taking place in the British courts, such as the two trials at the House of Lords. Nobody should have any inkling of these meetings, not even the Home Office of both countries, so that the dialogue could not be restricted by the limitations that came with official diplomatic exchanges.

The Chilean government took two months to decide who to send to London for the crucial negotiations. In a further contact with Blair, it had been agreed that only one person should come. The first proposal, Gabriel Valdés, the ex-Christian Democrat deputy, was rejected because his visit to London would be viewed as a political action and would be impossible to hide. Cristian Tolosa, the Director of the Communications and Culture Secretariat, was selected.

Tolosa travelled to London six times between June and December 1999, in conditions of absolute secrecy. His contacts were with the chief of Blair's Cabinet, Jonathan Powell. The informality of the meetings between Tolosa and Powell enabled the Chileans to put their demands openly and frankly. Among the things discussed were the transition to democratic rule, the implications of a ruling against Pinochet for the concept of national sovereignty and the possible effect of the case on the Chilean elections. The Chileans argued that as Home Secretary, Straw could interrupt the process of extradition at any time. Under their urgings Straw later commissioned a legal report into this possibility, which confirmed the Chilean thesis and made it possible for him to give the go-ahead for a medical examination of Pinochet to establish whether he was fit to stand trial.

Just days after the Chilean government heard that Straw had ordered a report on whether he could legally interrupt an extradition process for humanitarian reasons, a formal petition was presented to Straw for the release of Pinochet on compassionate grounds. This was accompanied by medical reports on Pinochet carried out by two doctors selected by the Chilean government, a report commissioned by the Chilean government on the legality of Straw interrupting the proceedings and a political evaluation of the inconvenience of Pinochet dying in Britain.

On November 5 1999, a letter was delivered to Pinochet's lawyer Michael Capland and the Chilean Ambassador to London Pablo Cabrera in which the Home Office responded positively to the Chilean government's demands and asked if Pinochet would be willing to undergo an independent medical examination to determine if his health demanded his return to Chile. The examination would take one or two weeks and then there would be another one or two weeks before the report would be delivered. The note ended, "before ending I would like to assure you that both the doctors and their teams as well as the Home Office will make every effort to keep the contents of the medical report confidential."

Pinochet was examined in Northwick Park Hospital in Middlesex. On January 11, 2000, Straw gave a statement to the press that he had concluded that Pinochet was not in condition to be tried and therefore he was of a mind to suspend the extradition. He added that Pinochet had been asked to give permission for a copy of the report to be given to Spain and other countries demanding extradition, but he had refused.

Chile's social democrats play a key role

Leading representatives of the Chilean Socialist Party played a key role in the manoevres detailed above. A chapter in the book entitled "The three socialist musketeers" singles out the Chilean Ambassador at the time of the arrest, Mario Artaza, the Home Secretary José Miguel Insulza and his successor Juan Gabriel Valdés as having worked might and main to secure Pinochet's release.

Mario Artaza was a first secretary of the Chilean Embassy in Washington prior to the 1973 coup. In March 1990 the first civil government after the so-called democratic transition offered him a job as ambassador to Geneva. In 1992 he was appointed director of multilateral policy and two years later director of planning. In 1996 he was offered the post of Ambassador to the United Kingdom, in which role he had dined with Pinochet during one of his trips to Britain. He worked energetically during the early stages of Pinochet's period of house arrest for his release.

José Miguel Insulza had been banished from Chile for 17 years by the Pinochet regime, but he also played a leading role in the initial stages of the public campaign to free the former dictator in defiance of protests from members of his own party. He met with many leading figures of the Blair government, including then Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and the Minister of Defence George Robertson, who later became the Secretary General of NATO.

On September 21 1976, Juan Gabriel Valdés had been due to be picked up by his friend and colleague from the Institute of Policy Studies (IEP) in Washington, Orlando Letelier. But his wife asked him to stay home and look after his child while she went to the supermarket. This was the only reason why he did not also die in the car bomb that blew up Letelier's car later that day. At the age of 43 in 1990, Valdés was named first Ambassador of the new Chilean democracy to Spain. On June 22, 1999, he was appointed by Frei as Insulza's replacement as Home Secretary. A few days later, together with Frei, he attended the first summit between the European Union and Latin America in Rio de Janeiro. There, he met the British and Spanish Foreign Ministers, Robin Cook and Abel Matutes, during which he urged Pinochet's release.

Soon after Valdés went to Auckland, New Zealand to attend meetings to prepare an Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit that was to take place in September. He had three free days before the meeting was due to start and called the Chilean embassy in London to pass a message to Cook telling him he would meet him anywhere in the world, and any time. Two days later he received notice that he did not need to travel anywhere because Robin Cook was going to Auckland to discuss the crisis in East Timor and Indonesia. Cook had reserved a room in Valdés hotel, four doors away. The first meeting Cook held as soon as he arrived was

© World Socialist Web Site

with the Chilean Home Secretary. They spent an hour in Cook's room. Valdés had instructions to put pressure on the British Home Secretary to interrupt the process of extradition and liberate the dictator for humanitarian reasons. A few weeks later the two met again at the United Nations headquarters in New York. Valdés came to the meeting with Pinochet's medical history and the latest medical report under his arm.

There was one further personnel change during the campaign for Pinochet's release. Abassador Mario Artaza was facing considerable personal difficulties with his family, according to the authors. The partner of his stepdaughter had disappeared during Pinochet's repression while on his way to buy cigarettes. He was found torn to pieces. His own daughter worked for an NGO of the Methodist Church. She phoned him and intimated he should resign. His opportunity to step out of the picture came when he was offered a transfer to Washington by Frei. He was replaced as Ambassador to Britain by Pablo Cabrera, an old friend of Valdés. Together it was they who were sent to meet with Straw to continue the efforts to convince him that he could legally interrupt the extradition proceedings and free Pinochet.

The outcome of these events is well known. Pinochet returned to Chile and was welcomed as a hero at the airport by his supporters and sections of the Army. In a final defiant gesture he got up from his wheel chair, asked for a walking stick and walked the 50 metres of red carpet that separated him from his helicopter. As he reached the helicopter he lifted his left arm in a triumphant gesture of victory. As well as his state of health, the argument used by those who worked to liberate him was that he would be tried in Chile, where more than 60 accusations had been filed against him. However, seventeen months later, in July 2001, three judges at the Santiago Appeals Court voted 2-1 to accept Pinochet's petition for a stay of proceedings, citing earlier medical tests showing that he suffered from "mild to moderate senile dementia". The halting of the proceedings against Pinochet after three years of international efforts to place him on trial to all intents and purposes ends this affair. No appeal is possible against the latest decision, except on the narrow grounds of legal or technical error. In short, as the evidence in this book indicates, the connivance of Britain's Labour government and the highest echelons of Chile's Socialist Party has succeeded in allowing the bloody murderer to remain free.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site