

Pinochet arrested in Chile on “Condor” killings

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14 December 2004

Chile’s former dictator Augusto Pinochet was indicted Monday and placed under house arrest in connection with Operation Condor, a conspiracy hatched by US-backed military regimes in Latin America in the 1970s to hunt down and murder their political opponents.

The ruling handed down by Judge Juan Guzman found the 89-year-old retired general fit to stand trial and charged him with the “permanent kidnapping” of nine people who disappeared in the dictatorship’s torture centers, and the murder of one.

While the victims of Condor amount to only a small fraction of the tens of thousands of Latin American workers, students and intellectuals who were murdered by the dictatorships, they were representative of a generation that was subjected to ruthless repression. Among them were opponents of the Pinochet regime who had fled persecution into what they thought was the safety of exile, only to be arrested and sent back to Chile and their deaths.

This killing spree was justified as a “war on terrorism” that respected no national boundaries and was aimed at exterminating all those who resisted military rule. The conspiracy was followed closely by the CIA and the US State Department, which provided covert support.

What cleared the way for Pinochet’s prosecution was Guzman’s ruling that the ex-dictator is mentally competent to stand trial.

The 70-page finding issued by the judge consists of two parts: the first reviews medical and other evidence on Pinochet’s mental and physical state; the second details the crimes carried out by his regime and the biographies of some of its victims. (See: “The victims of Operation Condor”).

For over six years, since his arrest in London on a

Spanish extradition warrant charging him with crimes against humanity, the ex-dictator has managed to evade prosecution by claiming that he was incapable of defending himself in a court of law because of senile dementia. The Labor government of Prime Minister Tony Blair used that as the pretext for freeing him to return to Chile after a year and a half under British house arrest.

Similarly, an indictment brought against him in 2001 in connection with the so-called “Caravan of Death” was dropped after Chile’s high court ruled that he was “crazy or demented,” and therefore unfit to stand trial. The case involved a hand-picked military death squad that was formed shortly after Pinochet seized power in the September 11, 1973 coup that overthrew the democratically elected leftist government of Salvador Allende. The death squad was sent across the country to murder political prisoners.

Guzman based his ruling on new medical exams administered to Pinochet after the Chilean Supreme Court stripped him of immunity in the Condor case last August.

The Chilean judge also cited a controversial interview that Pinochet granted a Spanish-language television station in Miami last year, in which he provided a lucid defense of his actions when he ruled Chile as both president and chief of the army.

Human rights groups and relatives of those who were murdered or disappeared under Pinochet’s rule welcomed the decision and predicted it would be difficult to overturn.

Eduardo Contreras, a lawyer representing the relatives, told the Chilean daily *El Mercurio* that the ruling “represents the culmination of many years of work.” He added that “Operation Condor is undoubtedly the most emblematic case because of its

international dimension and because of the clear involvement of the dictator.”

Guzman said Monday he has evidence that Pinochet attended the meetings in November 1975 where military intelligence and secret police officers from six countries, comprising two-thirds of Latin America’s population, met in Santiago to launch their sinister operation. Represented at this meeting, in addition to Chile, were Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia. Military regimes in Ecuador and Peru later joined the conspiracy.

The indictment states simply: “Beginning in 1974, an operation was organized to create a link between the intelligence services of some countries in the Southern Cone of this continent with the precise and specific aim of combating and repressing the supposed enemies of their respective governments and that, to that end, they mounted this plan or project that became known as ‘Condor.’”

It then reviews the identity of the victims who, having fled the Pinochet dictatorship, were kidnapped in neighboring countries and brought back to face death, most of them in Villa Grimaldi, the clandestine detention and torture center run by DINA, the Chilean secret police.

The Chilean court’s decision will have definite reverberations in Washington. If Pinochet is ultimately tried for these crimes, the US government may well find itself in the dock. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who remains a close confidante of the Bush administration, is directly implicated in the 1973 coup and US support for the savage repression that followed. Others who held high positions in the Nixon and Ford administrations at the time of Operation Condor and share complicity in these crimes include Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Charges of crimes against humanity have been brought against Pinochet not only in his own country, but also in Spain, France and elsewhere. The unraveling of his defense strategy cannot be viewed as a welcome development by a government in Washington that is carrying out its own war crimes from Iraq to Guantanamo.

Among those who have spoken out, calling for Pinochet’s prosecution, is Manuel Contreras, the former head of DINA, who was convicted and

imprisoned for crimes carried out under the Chilean dictatorship, including the 1976 assassination of Orlando Letelier and his American assistant Ronni Moffitt on the streets of Washington. The killing was part of Operation Condor.

Contreras, who was a paid asset of the US Central Intelligence Agency, insists that Pinochet was responsible for directing the operations of DINA.

In addition to the Operation Condor case, Pinochet was stripped of immunity from prosecution earlier this month in connection with the 1974 car bomb assassination in Argentina of General Carlos Prats and his wife. Prats, a former head of the Chilean army, had opposed the 1973 coup and fled into exile.

The ex-dictator is also facing a criminal investigation into his multi-million-dollar secret accounts at the Riggs Bank in Washington, which were uncovered by a US Senate committee’s investigation of the bank’s illicit practices.



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