

Italian judge seeks trial of 140 over Operation Condor repression

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An Italian judge has issued orders for the preventive arrest pending deportation of at least 140 former officials of military dictatorships that ruled seven Latin American countries between the 1960s and 1980s. They are charged with responsibility for the deaths of 25 Italian citizens, who were among the tens of thousands of opponents of these regimes murdered, tortured and illegally imprisoned under a US-backed campaign of repression known as Operation Condor.

During the 1970s and 1980s, dictatorships in Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Peru, with the aid of the US CIA, developed Operation Condor as a program of coordinated continental repression, pooling their police-military resources in order to hunt down exiles and send them back to their deaths, while allowing secret police death squads to freely cross borders.

Among those the Italian judge, Luisanna Figliola, has asked be arrested are former Argentine dictator Jorge Videla, his fellow junta member and navy chief Emilio Eduardo Massera, and Jorge Maria Bordaberry, who headed Uruguay's dictatorship between 1973 and 1976, as well as Francisco Morales Bermúdez, who was Peru's dictator between 1975 and 1980, and Pedro Richter, another Peruvian ex-general who served as Peru's prime minister.

Others charged are military officers and secret policemen, including 61 from Argentina, 32 from Uruguay, 22 Chileans and 13 Brazilians. Also accused are former Bolivian and Paraguayan officials

The Italian government has one of the accused in custody—Nestor Jorge Fernandez Troccoli, a former member of FUSNA, Uruguayan naval intelligence. Troccoli, who recently became an Italian citizen, was arrested in Salerno in southern Italy on Christmas Eve. He also faces charges in Uruguay in a case in which Gregorio Alvarez, the Uruguay's last de facto president under the dictatorship that ruled that country from 1973 and 1985, has been jailed on charges related to the abduction and disappearance of political prisoners who were sent back to Argentina to be killed.

According to court documents, Troccoli was a regular visitor to the Argentine navy's infamous Escuela Superior de Mecánica, which served as a torture and execution center under that country's dictatorship, which murdered an estimated 30,000 workers, students and other perceived enemies of the regime in the 1970s.

During this period, drugged prisoners were thrown out of helicopters into the sea, headless and handless corpses washed up on the beaches of the Rio de la Plata and tens of

thousands were subjected to hideous forms of torture in clandestine prisons throughout Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and other countries.

Whether any of the other defendants will join Troccoli in the prisoner's dock in Italy is far from certain. Previous attempts by European governments to bring charges related to the "dirty wars" in Latin America—most notably Spain's 1998 bid to have Chile's ex-dictator extradited from Britain to stand trial—have been frustrated. Initial reaction from several Latin American governments has been largely hostile to the Italian case.

Peruvian President Alan Garcia called the charges "a judicial exaggeration" and denied that Peru had even participated in Operation Condor. Of Morales Bermudez, who seized power in a 1975 coup, he said, "We will give him all the help necessary. He is a respectable personality and we owe him respect and honor."

In Brazil, Paulo Vannuchi, secretary for human rights, said he welcomed the Italian charges and called for the government to repeal a so-called amnesty law enacted in 1979, which granted members of the dictatorship full immunity from charges related to the murders, torture and disappearances carried out during two decades of military rule. The act was typical of the so-called "laws of impunity" enacted during the period of "transition to democracy" that began in Latin America during the late 1970s. It has prevented the prosecution of any of Brazil's repressors and largely blocked any official investigation into their crimes. Vannuchi stressed that the law stood in contradiction to a number of international treaties and represented a potential impediment to Brazil's campaign to secure a seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Other officials in the Workers Party (PT) government of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva made it clear, however, that there is no intention of complying with any Italian extradition request. "Brazilian law doesn't permit extradition," said Justice Minister Tarso Genro. He suggested that the government could investigate the case of two Italians abducted in 1980 and sent to their deaths in Argentina—no mention of the thousands of Brazilians who suffered similar fates—but indicated that no one could be punished.

And Defense Minister Nelson Jobim insisted that the government could take no action to reopen any case stemming from the dictatorship's repression. "This is not a matter for the Ministry of Justice, nor is it a theme for the executive branch," he said.

Jobim learned his lesson last August when he and Lula participated in a conference organized by the National Congress in which relatives of the dictatorship's victims participated. The head of a government-formed Special Commission on the Death and Disappearance of Political Prisoners used the event to call for changes in the amnesty law.

The comment provoked an emergency meeting and an angry declaration from the joint chiefs of staff of the Brazilian military, who threatened that any attempt to amend the law would represent a "step backwards for national peace and harmony." The commanders solidarized themselves with the dictatorship, stressing that throughout Brazilian history "we have been the same army of Caxias [the nineteenth century Brazilian military leader]," and that "historical facts have different interpretations, depending upon viewpoint of their protagonists."

Lula and Jobim quickly capitulated to the military's threat.

Meanwhile, one of those wanted by the Italian courts boasted to the Brazilian media about his role. Agnaldo del Nero, a former section chief in Brazilian army intelligence, told the daily *O Estado de Sao Paulo*: “We didn’t kill. We arrested people and handed them over. There’s no crime in that.” He cynically claimed that Brazil’s role in Operation Condor was limited to sharing information with and training the agents of other Latin American secret police agencies and “monitoring subversives.”

However, recent reports in the Brazilian press—including a January 13 article in the daily *Folha de Sao Paulo*—have exposed the close collaboration between Brazilian military intelligence and its counterparts in Chile and Argentina in the abduction and murder of opponents of the military regimes, even before Operation Condor was formally launched in 1975.

While all the cases in the Italian indictments involve Italian citizens, many of them holding dual citizenship in Argentina and Uruguay, they are representative of the thousands of victims of Operation Condor.

Refugees abducted in Lima

For example, in Peru, the case against Morales Bermudez and Richter stems from the June 1980 abduction in Lima of two Argentines and one Italian woman who were leftist refugees from the dictatorship in Argentina.

This state crime, carried out in the waning day of Morales Bermudez’s military regime, began with the arrest of Maria Ines Riverta, an Argentine, in front of the Church of Miraflores in Lima. She was then subjected to prolonged electric shock torture to force her to reveal the whereabouts of the two others, Julio Cesar Ramirez and Noemi Gianotti de Molfino. They too were soon picked up.

The Italian, Gianotti de Molfino, 55, had reached Lima with her youngest child at the beginning of 1980 after her husband had been murdered by the Argentine dictatorship, her oldest son imprisoned, her two grandchildren disappeared and her daughter exiled to France.

One month after her abduction in Lima, her body was discovered in a hotel room in Madrid. Her two comrades were sent back to Argentina and disappeared.

Italian prosecutor Giancarlo Capaldo has been investigating the crimes of the Latin American dictatorships since 1999 in response to charges brought by relatives of Italian victims of repression. Under Italian law, magistrates are empowered to investigate and prosecute the murder of Italians overseas.

According to the UPI news agency, Capaldo’s position is that “the United States was aware of Operation Condor but did not participate in it.”

There is ample evidence however, that the CIA and the US government had a direct hand in the repression. Capaldo’s position likely represents either a political decision not to directly antagonize Washington or a tactical calculation based on the recognition that no US official would ever be extradited to stand trial on matters of international law.

The Italian judge’s arrest orders came just weeks after one of the key figures in the reign of terror inflicted upon the people of Chile following the CIA-backed coup of September 11,

1973, gave fresh testimony on the intimate involvement of the CIA in the crimes committed under Operation Condor.

In a December 2 televised interview, Manuel Contreras, the former head of Chile's notorious secret police, the Directorate of National Intelligence, or DINA, said that two assassinations carried out against the Chilean dictatorship's opponents had been approved by and jointly organized with the CIA.

The first was that of Gen. Carlos Prats, the ex-chief of the Chilean army, who had opposed the US-backed coup led by Gen. Augusto Pinochet. Prats and his wife were murdered in a car bombing in Buenos Aires, where they had gone into exile.

The second was that of Orlando Letelier, the former foreign minister in the overthrown government of Salvador Allende and a key figure in the international opposition to Pinochet. He was also killed in a car bombing together with his aide, Ronni Moffitt, in the streets of Washington, D.C. At the time, the bombing was considered the worst act of foreign terrorism ever to have occurred in the US capital.

"Pinochet along with [US CIA deputy director Vernon] Walters were in agreement about all of the problems that existed with respect to international activities," Contreras said in the interview with the Chilean television channel TVN.

Contreras said that the decision to kill Letelier had been reached during meetings between Pinochet and Walters in 1976.

Documents released by the US government in 2000 confirmed that Contreras himself was a paid "asset" of the CIA, while the leading figure convicted in the Letelier assassination was US-born Michael Townley, an operative of DINA, whom Contreras has said was also employed by the CIA. Townley, who has since also confessed to the assassination of Prats and his wife as well as other opponents of the Pinochet dictatorship, was tried in the US for the Letelier murder and sent into the FBI's witness protection program after just five years in jail.

In Uruguay, one of the attorneys for the victim's families in the case now unfolding over Operation Condor has demanded that the government seek the extradition of former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger for his role in the state terror and repression during that period.

The dictatorships in Latin America "were mere executors" of a "plan of extermination" worked out in Washington by leading US officials, including Kissinger—a firm defender of the military regimes—the lawyer, Gustavo Salle said.

Nor is it just Kissinger, a leading advisor to the Bush administration, who should be called to account for these crimes. While Walters is dead, at the time of his reported meetings with Contreras, the CIA's director was George H.W. Bush, the current president's father. Donald Rumsfeld, Bush's ex-defense secretary, meanwhile, held the same post at the Pentagon between 1975 and 1977, overseeing US backing for the Latin American military as it carried out repression throughout the continent. And Vice President Dick Cheney worked as White House chief of staff.

In the midst of its relentless propaganda campaign about a US global war on terror, Washington continues to protect professional terrorists like Townley and the CIA-trained

anti-Castro Cuban airline bomber and assassin Luis Posada Carriles. Moreover, the political establishment itself counts among its leading figures men who are deeply implicated in the wave of state terror and repression that claimed the lives of tens of thousands in Latin America 30 years ago.

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