“Operation Condor”. Latin America: The Thirty Years Dirty War

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By Global Research News
Global Research, March 10, 2013
Le Monde Diplomatique (English edition) 1 May 2001

Region: Latin America & Caribbean

Article originally published in May 2001

A Mexican judge has ruled that an exiled Argentinian torturer must be extradited to stand trial in Spain; a Buenos Aires court has waived military immunity against criminal charges. And evidence mounts of decades of war by Latin American dictatorships, with the connivance of the United States, against leftwing dissidents.

For the Common Defense ! was a quasi-documentary short in MGM’s *Crime Does Not Pay* series. It was made in 1942 and featured a mysterious “Senor Castillo of the Chilean intelligence service”, who assured filmgoers that Chile was playing its part alongside the western democracies in the fight against the dictatorships and foreign agents that threatened the country. In the ruthless struggle, the main weapon, he said, was cooperation between police forces throughout North and South America.

The film was inspired by the FBI and designed as an attack on Nazi spies in Latin America and a demonstration of cooperation between police and intelligence services on a continental scale. There, in the middle of the second world war, are the seeds of Operation Condor, a continental campaign of repression waged by Latin American dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s against the new enemy – “international communism”.

The ramifications of Operation Condor were first revealed in December 1992 by several tonnes of documents from the Stroessner dictatorship, soon dubbed the “archives of terror”, discovered in a police station in Lambare, 15 miles from the Paraguayan capital of Asuncion. The tale they told was confirmed in detail by CIA documents declassified last November.

The United States had begun warning South American military commanders about the dangers of communism at the Inter-American Conference on the Problems of War and Peace, held at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City in February 1945. Bilateral agreements on mutual military assistance followed in 1951. They covered the supply of US arms and funding to Latin American countries, the secondment of US military advisers, and the training of Latin American officers in the US and at the US army’s School of the Americas in the Panama Canal Zone.

The move towards “continental defence against communism” was speeded by the victory of Castro’s revolution in 1959. The following year General Theodore F Bogart, US Southern

Command supremo, invited his Latin American colleagues to a “friendly meeting” at his base in the Canal Zone to discuss problems of common interest. The outcome was an annual Conference of American Armies (CAA), first held at Fort Amador in Panama. In 1964 it was transferred to West Point, and from 1965 it met every two years. The West Point venue, a secretive meeting place symptomatic of cold war paranoia, was the heart of the future Operation Condor.

Sharing intelligence

Apart from “international communism”, a convenient catchphrase for all political opponents, Latin American military commanders were obsessed with links between their intelligence services. At its second meeting, the CAA called for the creation of a standing committee in the Panama Canal Zone to exchange information and intelligence (1). In response, a continent-wide communication network was established and top-secret bilateral intelligence meetings were held between Argentina and Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia, and others.

Files made available by those countries were circulated through a network of military attachés known as Agremil. Most were supplied by military intelligence services (G-2), but others came from security police or shadier bodies like the Organismo Coordinador de Operaciones Antisubversivas (Ocoa), a Uruguayan death squad that carried out interrogations, torture and executions, mainly in Argentina (2).

At the CAA’s 10th meeting, held in Caracas on 3 September 1973, General Breno Borges Fortes, commander-in-chief of the Brazilian army, agreed that the struggle against communism was exclusively a matter for the armed forces of the individual countries. As far as collective action was concerned, “the only effective methods are the exchange of experience and information, plus technical assistance when requested” (3). On this basis, the CAA decided to “strengthen information exchange in order to counter terrorism and control subversive elements in each country” (4).

From the time of Juan Domingo Peron’s return to power in 1973 to the 1976 putsch, when most of South America was gradually coming under the thumb of military regimes on the Brazilian model, Argentina lived through a curious transition period. Its police and armed forces stepped up repression and authorised the establishment of death squads like the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance (AAA). But, at the same time, it was the only country in the Southern Cone in which thousands of mainly Chilean and Uruguayan victims of political and social repression were able to take refuge.

In March 1974 Chilean, Uruguayan and Bolivian police leaders met with the deputy chief of the Argentinian federal police, Alberto Villar (joint founder of the AAA), to investigate ways of working together to destroy what they saw as the hotbed of subversion constituted by the presence of thousands of foreign political refugees in Argentina. The Chilean representative, a general of the *carabinieri* (military police), proposed that a police officer or member of the armed forces be accredited to every embassy as a security agent in order to coordinate operations with the police and security authorities of each country. He also called for the creation of “an intelligence centre where we can obtain information on individual Marxists and … exchange programmes and information about politicians. In addition,” he argued, “we must be able to move freely across the frontiers between Bolivia, Chile and Argentina and operate in all three countries without an official warrant” (5).

Villar promised that the Argentinian Federal Police's Foreign Affairs Department (DAE) would deal with foreigners that neighbouring juntas wanted out of the way. In August 1974 the corpses of foreign, especially Bolivian, refugees started to appear on Buenos Aires refuse tips. On 30 September a bomb placed in Buenos Aires by a Chilean commando group led by CIA agent (or former agent) Michael Townley killed General Carlos Prats, commander-in-chief of the Chilean army under the Popular Unity government, who was the spearhead of opposition to Pinochet.

Police and military commando groups now crossed borders at will. In March and April 1975 more than two dozen Uruguayans were arrested in Buenos Aires by Argentinian and Uruguayan police officers, who interrogated them jointly in Argentinian police stations. Jorge Isaac Fuentes Alarcon, an Argentinian militant, was arrested on the Paraguayan border by Paraguayan police. As Chile's National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation (the Retting commission) subsequently established in its report of 8 February 1991 to President Patricio Aylwin (6), he was interrogated not only by Paraguayan police and Argentinian intelligence officers but also by officials of the US embassy in Buenos Aires, who passed information on to Chile's National Intelligence Directorate (Dina).

State within a state

Meanwhile, Chile had put the finishing touches to its own system of repression. Following the putsch of 11 September 1973, for which US president Richard Nixon and his secretary of state Henry Kissinger bore direct responsibility, Pinochet gave Colonel Manuel Contreras full powers to "extirpate the cancer of communism" from the country. Dina soon became a state within the state.

The Chilean dictatorship was particularly exercised by the presence of large numbers of implacable opponents abroad. It had managed to kill General Prats, but in February 1975 the anti-Castro Cubans recruited for the purpose bungled the assassination of Carlos Altamirano and Volodia Teitelboim, the leaders of the exiled Chilean Socialist and Communist parties. In early April Contreras visited the Latin American capitals in order to persuade the security services of the whole continent to set up a special anti-exile force. On 25 August he was at CIA headquarters in Washington, where he met Vernon Walters, deputy director responsible for Latin America.

Two days later he had a meeting with Rafael Rivas Vasquez, assistant director of the Venezuelan intelligence agency (Disip), in Caracas: "He explained ... that he wanted to place agents in all Chilean embassies abroad and that he was already training embassy officials who were prepared to act as intelligence agents if required. He said he had already made several successful trips to obtain the support of Latin American intelligence services. Everything was based on unwritten agreements" (7). According to Rivas, the Venezuelan government ordered the Disip to reject Contreras' overtures. It was the only refusal. All the other countries (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia) agreed.

At the same time the order was given to set up an anti-subversion network in Europe based on Italian rightwing terrorist groups. Unable to get at Carlos Altamirano, who was living under armed guard in the Federal Republic of Germany, the assassins turned their attention to Bernardo Leighton, Chile's former vice president and a founder member of the Christian Democratic Party. On 6 October 1975 Leighton and his wife were attacked by a fascist hit squad in Rome. They survived the shooting, but Mrs Leighton was left permanently paralysed. Despite this failure, Pinochet had a meeting with Stefano Delle Chiaie, leader of

the Italian commando groups, who agreed to remain at Chile's disposal.

At its meeting of 19-26 October 1975 in Montevideo, the CAA gave the go-ahead for a first "working meeting on national intelligence services", prepared by Contreras. It took place from 25 November to 1 December in Santiago de Chile and was classified top secret. Contreras' main proposal was the creation of a continental database "similar to the Interpol database in Paris, but specialising in subversion". This was the beginning of the Chilean contribution to Operation Condor.

According to the CIA, which claims not to have heard of Condor until 1976 (8), three of the countries involved, namely Chile, Argentina and Uruguay, "extended cooperation on anti-subversion activities to the assassination of high-ranking terrorists living in exile in Europe". Although it had been accepted for years that information was to be exchanged bilaterally, "a third, top-secret phase of Operation Condor apparently involved training special teams from member countries for joint operations that included the assassination of terrorists and terrorist sympathisers. When a terrorist or sympathiser from a member country was identified, a team would be sent to locate the target and keep him under surveillance. Then a hit squad would be despatched. The special teams were made up of people from one or several Condor states who were supplied with false identity papers issued by member countries."

The CIA claims that the operation centre for phase three was in Buenos Aires, where a special team had been set up. Meanwhile, bilateral meetings between the countries of the Southern Cone continued as usual under the aegis of the CAA, and their effects were just as devastating (9).

Many Condor meetings took place in 1976. They were often attended by the same people who took part in CAA bilateral meetings. According to the CIA, "although cooperation between the various intelligence and security services had existed for some time, it was not formalised until late May 1976 at a Condor meeting in Santiago de Chile, where the main topic was long-term cooperation between the services of the participating countries going well beyond the exchange of information. The Condor member countries identified themselves by code numbers: Condor One, Condor Two, etc.

It was a bad year for their political opponents, who had taken refuge wherever they could. Under the pretext of attacking terrorists committed to armed resistance, the murderers struck out at anyone, crossing frontiers at will. Increasing numbers of political opponents were assassinated or "disappeared". On 8 June, in the course of a friendly chat in Santiago, Kissinger assured Pinochet that "the people of the United States are wholeheartedly behind you ... and wish you every success" (10).

Flying like a condor

But the scale of repression made the existence of Condor increasingly difficult to hide. The CIA itself became a source of embarrassing rumours as staff exchanged quips about colleagues sent abroad because they could "fly like a condor". Finally, Contreras' own policy of targeted assassinations put paid to the operation. On 21 September 1976 he had Chile's former foreign minister, Orlando Letelier, assassinated in Washington. It was a major blunder. The US investigators were determined to identify those responsible. The FBI's chief officer in Buenos Aires filed a special report on phase three of Operation Condor, and extracts found their way into the American press. A Congressional committee of inquiry was

quickly set up. The Chileans responded by disbanding Dina and replacing it by another organisation. Contreras was ditched.

The newly elected US president Jimmy Carter had made human rights part of his platform. He was not prepared to countenance Condor-type operations. At the very least, he did not want the US involved in them. The prevailing view is that the Carter administration pressured the Latin American countries to close Condor down.

Representatives of all the Condor member states met in Buenos Aires on 13-15 December 1976 to discuss future plans in the light of the new situation. The Argentinians, who had outstripped all the other dictatorships in the ferocity of their methods since the putsch of 23 March, took matters in hand. With help from Paraguay, they sought a more secure and discreet channel for anti-subversion operations in the form of the Latin American Anti-Communist Federation (CAL), an offshoot of the World Anti-Communist League (WACL).

The CAL held its third meeting in Asuncion in March 1977. It was attended by the top brass of the dictatorships, including General Gustavo Leigh, a member of the Chilean junta, and General Jorge Videla, the Argentinian president, together with an assortment of Latin America's torturers and death squad members. Their main problems were the US' new strategy of re-establishing democracy in Latin America, the spread of guerrilla movements in Central America, and the position of whole sections of the Catholic Church that appeared to be an integral part of the international communist movement.

A plan proposed by the Bolivians, named after the Bolivian dictator, was adopted. Its purpose was to "eradicate" proponents of liberation theology. Under the Banzer plan, which culminated in the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in San Salvador, hundreds of priests, monks, nuns, lay members of religious communities and bishops were executed,

An end to formal restraints

Taking charge of repression throughout Latin America, the Argentinians discarded all formal restraints. The coordination of repression was entrusted to death squads. Even though some were composed of soldiers and policemen, this was tantamount to privatising anti-subversion operations. At the same time bilateral intelligence meetings of national security agencies, as well as meetings of the CAA, continued under the aegis of the US. In 1977 the CAA met in Managua, Nicaragua, and in 1979 in Bogota, Colombia. The Argentinians also sent several missions to Central America to assist local armed forces and political police. In the spring of 1979 they started anti-subversion training courses in Buenos Aires to reduce dependence on the US war schools. The fall of the Somoza regime in July 1979 encouraged the Latin American dictatorships to standardise their anti-subversion methods.

The CAL's fourth meeting, chaired by Argentinian general Suarez Mason in Buenos Aires in September 1980, favoured the adoption of an "Argentinian solution" throughout Latin America. From April 1980 the US Department of Defence was aware that Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Brazil were once again pursuing the idea of an "international anti-terrorist organisation" – Condor in a new guise. Meanwhile, the CAL was coordinating massacres carried out by death squads and security forces in Central America. The Agremil files continued to circulate in the general staffs, yielding a rich harvest of cross-border arrests, exchanges of prisoners and international torture squads.

In 1981 the CAA meeting was held in Washington, following the election of a Republican

president, Ronald Reagan. Developments took a new turn as the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua gave fresh impetus to anti-subversion cooperation (11). The participants decided to renew their bilateral agreements on the exchange of information about so-called terrorists and to set up a permanent CAA secretariat. This came into being on 24 May 1984 in Santiago de Chile.

When Argentina returned to democracy in 1985, the Chilean military regime was left as the last rampart against communism in South America except for Paraguay. The Reagan administration entrusted its programme of secret war in Central America to the CIA , the CAL and the private sector. The CAA remained committed to an ideology of war against international communism, except that the term now included human rights activists as well as leftwing and clerical opponents. Judges and journalists calling for torturers to be brought to trial were gradually included, as were critics of corruption, in which the military were deeply implicated..

Operation Condor as such vanished in the jungles of Central America when the US took over the struggle against the Nicaraguan Sandanistas. But it was the end of the cold war and the accumulation of its own excesses that dealt it a fatal blow. Strictly speaking, it was directed against only a few dozen or few hundred targeted victims. But the overall toll of repression in the Southern Cone alone during the period of its existence totalled over 50,000 murdered, 35,000 disappeared and 400,000 imprisoned.

Although torture and executions are no longer institutionalised on a continental scale, there is no reason to believe these practices have ceased. The crimes of the Colombian paramilitaries linked to sections of the country's armed forces are clear evidence to the contrary. On 8 May 2000 a report by the Committee on Hemispheric Security of the Organisation of American States (OAS) reviewed 10 years of anti-subversion cooperation among the various South and Central American states. While the designated enemy is now drugs-traffickers rather than communists and there are references to human rights, the message is still the same.

Numerous Latin American states have concluded agreements among themselves and with the US aimed at greater bilateral or multilateral cooperation against terrorism, money laundering and drug trafficking. These agreements confirm the role of the armed forces in social control.

Similarly, since the mid-1990s and under the aegis of the US, the Latin American countries have increased their bilateral exchange arrangements. In the intelligence field alone, dozens of arrangements are in force, in addition to the annual conference of the intelligence services of the armies of the OAS member states. The CAA still meets (in Argentina in 1995 and in Ecuador in 1997). A multilateral military conference on intelligence services, the first since the meeting set up by Contreras in 1975, was organised by the Bolivian army on 8-10 March 1999. It was attended by representatives of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, the US (Southern Command), Uruguay and Venezuela.

"Security in the Americas", so dear to the US, does not necessarily give first place to democracy. It would not take much for Operation Condor to rise from the ashes.

Notes:

(1) Permanent Executive Secretariat of the Conference of American Armies (PESCAA), Information Bulletin no. 1, Santiago, Chile, 1985

(2) See *Nunca Más (never again): a report by Argentina's National Commission on Disappeared People*, Faber in association with Index on Censorship, London, 1986.

(3) See Diffusion de l'information sur l'Amérique Latine (DIAL), no. 125, Paris, 25 October 1973

(4) PESCAA, Information Bulletin No.1, op. cit.

(5) Stenographer's record published by *El Autentico*, Buenos Aires, 10 December 1975.

(6) The full text of the report is available in English translation at www.nd.edu/

(7) Testimony given on 29 June 1979 to a Washington court during the trial of Orlando Letelier's assassins.

(8) Whether this claim is true or false, the fact remains that Contreras was a CIA informer from 1974 to 1977 and was on the agency's payroll until 1975 ("by mistake", the CIA claims), as revealed by a declassified document submitted to the US Congress at its request on 19 September 2000. See *El Nuevo Herald*, Miami, 20 September 2000.

(9) The Argentinians alone did not rely entirely on the United States in their "dirty war". In 1976 a French military mission was sent to Buenos Aires to train the Argentinian armed forces in anti-subversion operations.

(10) Declassified document quoted in *El Pais*, 28 February 1999

(11) On 1 December 1981 the US administration released $19m to fund the training of an initial contingent of 500 Contras (Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries) by Argentinian officers.

Le Monde Diplomatique (English edition), translated by Barry Smerin, August 2001
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Retour sur un terrorisme d'état béni par les Etats-Unis

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par Pierre Abramovici, Le Monde Diplomatique, Mai 2001

Articles by: Global Research News