

11-14-2003

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Chile Rocked by Sex and Spy Scandals." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13205>

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Chile Rocked by Sex and Spy Scandals

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Chile

Published: 2003-11-14

For the past month, Chile has been gripped by a pedophilia scandal in which several members of Congress have been implicated. As the investigation of the accusations was still unfolding, a spying incident by Chilean intelligence agents in an Argentine consulate brought the ouster of several Chilean military officers and threatened the good relations between the neighbors.

The scandal regarding the alleged participation of three senators in a pedophilia ring has damaged the reputation of Chile's political leaders. The initial reactions by political leaders and government officials ran more toward closing ranks around the accused, attacking journalists, and complaining of a smear campaign than to concern for finding out the truth behind the allegations.

President Ricardo Lagos warned against making "wild, irresponsible" accusations, while Interior Minister Jose Miguel Insulza said emphatically that the government fights pedophilia, but defends the honor of individuals. "Let the judges take care of the matter, and let the accused parties defend themselves," Insulza said.

Meanwhile, suspicions were growing that powerful interests were protecting some of those involved. Health club owner allegedly ran pedophilia ring In December 2002, Claudio Spiniak, a well-connected and wealthy businessman and owner of an up-scale health club, was arrested on firearms and drug charges. At the time, authorities seized some 300 videos that belonged to Spiniak. The videos were in court custody but never screened, and Spiniak was released after high-level Carabinero police officials declined to formalize charges against him.

Spiniak was arrested again in September, after a teenage boy told police that minors in Santiago were offered money to have sex at parties hosted by the businessman. Only after the second arrest did anyone screen the videos, which contained graphic sexual scenes involving young victims. The judge who had custody of the videos was removed from the case and reprimanded for negligence.

Judicial sources said in late October that at least 57 people were under investigation by special prosecutor Judge Daniel Calvo in connection with the alleged ring run by Spiniak. He was charged on Oct. 6 with rape and producing pornographic material. So far, he has not been charged with pedophilia, which in Chile means sex with someone under 12.

Scandal spreads to Congress

On Oct. 10, Renovacion Nacional (RN) Deputy Maria Pia Guzman said on television that two lawmakers from the Union Demócrata Independiente (UDI) and one from the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC) were involved in the pedophilia ring run by Spiniak. Guzman refused to name the lawmakers. For speaking out, Guzman was forced to resign as RN vice president the following day.

Reaction to her statements varied from condemnation from her supposed allies within the UDI, which together with the RN forms the right-wing Alianza por Chile, to more sympathetic responses. RN president Sebastian Pinera criticized the way she made her revelations public, but said she "was not a liar."

As media coverage continued, one male minor, in two TV interviews, said he had been involved in the activities on the tapes and that he had seen political figures at the parties. The press also reported that a young woman, now 20, had testified before Judge Calvo that UDI Sen. Jovino Novoa had raped her. The press also said UDI Sen. Carlos Bombal had been identified on the tapes engaging in sexual activities with minors.

Among those defending the actions of Guzman was Catholic priest Jose Luis Ariagoitia, director of Fundacion de Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe, which works with abused children. The priest had put Judge Calvo in contact with the young woman who accused Novoa of rape. In her first public statements since the scandal erupted, Guzman said on Nov. 4 that she regretted any harm her actions may have caused "innocent people and their families." She was officially "reproached" by the Chamber of Deputies' ethics committee, but insisted that she acted "in good faith."

Problems for Alianza

The scandal may split the alliance between the UDI and the RN. Many in the Alianza believe that UDI president Sen. Pablo Longueira, who filed a criminal defamation suit against Guzman Oct. 13, is damaging the Alianza's reputation and detracting from the real issue, that of investigating the pedophilia allegations. Longueira said the charges are part of a plot against the UDI to thwart the presidential aspirations of Santiago mayor Joaquin Lavín. "Pia Guzman has lied from day one until today," Longueira told Radio Agricultura. "She has destroyed two of this country's families, the families of two senators who are exemplary public servants to Chile," he added, referring to Sens. Novoa and Bombal. Longueira also lashed out against Ariagoitia.

On Nov. 2, Spiniak denied the accusations of pedophilia and said he had no high-level political or business friends who were involved in the incidents on the tapes. The case took another strange twist on Nov. 6, when Judge Calvo, in a dramatic press conference, claimed he has been the victim of an "undercover extortion" attempt by the manager of a gay bathhouse.

Calvo admitted having visited the establishment and said he would leave it up to the Corte Suprema to decide the future course of the investigation. "I have not committed any act in my private life that has the characteristics of a crime, nor have I done anything that could compromise the investigations with which I have been entrusted," said Calvo.

Calvo, married and the father of five, has the support of his wife, Monica Olivares. She told the press that she was convinced her husband was being targeted because of something he was close to uncovering in his investigation. Members of the political establishment from across the political spectrum came to the judge's defense.

"I'm under the impression that being gay isn't a crime, and I understand that visiting these types of saunas is also not a crime," UDI Deputy Julio Dittborn told the daily La Nacion.

On Nov. 7, the Corte Suprema removed Calvo from the case. The court said it made the decision because of events that were public knowledge, referring to Calvo's admission, but it did not say why the confession disqualified Calvo, who has not been accused of any crime, from running the investigation. The high-profile case will now be headed by Judge Sergio Munoz Gajardo, a widely-respected investigating judge.

Spy scandal strains relations with Argentina

As the public's attention was riveted on the pedophilia scandal, the news broke that Chilean intelligence agents had broken into the Argentine consulate in the city of Punta Arenas, 3,200 km south of Santiago. The alleged espionage put an unexpected strain on diplomatic relations between Chile and Argentina.

On Nov. 9, Argentine vice consul Jose Andres Barbus said he unexpectedly went to his office where he found two men going through classified documents. Barbus said one man fled, and he struggled with the other, who dropped a folder before he ran out. The men left behind two jackets, a briefcase, and a camera. One jacket had a Chilean identity card and a weapons permit. Barbus said that the safe had been broken into and that documents had been taken from office files. The men had made photocopies of some diplomatic paperwork, he said.

The following day, Gen. Waldo Sauritz Sepulveda, head of the Region Militar Austral (Region XII), resigned after confirming that agents from the Inteligencia Militar had been responsible for the break-in. The Ministry of Defense also said that Lt. Col. Victor Hugo Poza Reyes of the Region XII intelligence unit was being relieved. "The two agents acted independently and outside instructions from superiors, going against existing institutional norms," said the ministry statement. It added that an investigation would begin immediately and said it "regrets and condemns the acts," emphasizing its desire to continue improving "the transparency and confidence that exists between both countries."

After a one-hour meeting between Chilean Foreign Relations Minister Soledad Alvear and Argentine Ambassador Carlos Abihaggle, Alvear said that the dismissal of the two officers showed the Lagos administration's determination to treat the case seriously.

President Lagos said he had spoken with Argentine President Nestor Kirchner and assured him that the matter would be thoroughly investigated. La Nacion described the scandal as the most serious between Argentina and Chile since a territorial dispute over three islands in the Beagle Channel almost led to war in 1978. The Argentine and Chilean governments have recently been enjoying warm relations, and, with the election of Kirchner, diplomatic ties seemed more positive than ever.

On Nov. 11, Argentine Defense Minister Jose Pampuro said his government "is waiting for a more solid response" from Chile and wants to know "in depth" the motives for the "painful" incident. The

Chilean government said four people, including the two who carried out the break-in, have been arrested. What is still unclear is the motive.

Some analysts have suggested that it was a deliberate, clumsy operation aimed at embarrassing Defense Minister Michelle Bachelet, a popular public figure who is often mentioned as a possible presidential candidate.

On Nov. 12, Bachelet said the president had ordered a sweeping review of intelligence operations, and she said the government would increase its control over the military's intelligence unit. Bachelet did not rule out that other military officers could be questioned and possibly reprimanded as part of the investigation.

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