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US Espionage of Chilean and Mexican UN Delegations

by LADB Staff

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US espionage against UN delegations in early 2003 has re-emerged as an international issue. Revelations have come out that the Mexican government recently asked the US for an explanation of its actions during the run-up to the US-led war in Iraq, while Chilean government spokespersons have said they dealt with the matter privately. Concurrently, the British government decided not to prosecute the linguist who originally leaked details about US spying against UN delegations.

In early 2003, the US government was seeking UN approval for its invasion of Iraq. The governments of the US, Britain, and Spain presented a resolution to the UN Security Council, which also had the support of Bulgaria, but faced opposition from France, Russia, Germany, Syria, and China. That left the "middle-six" countries on the council with control of the fate of the war resolution: Chile, Mexico, Angola, Cameroon, Guinea, and Pakistan.

US efforts to spy on the middle-six countries came to light in March 2003 when linguist Katherine Gun, a translator in Britain's General Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), leaked documents to The Observer newspaper of London (see NotiSur, 2003-03-14). The GCHQ is England's eavesdropping intelligence unit. The revelation scandalized career diplomats, created an uproar in Chilean political circles, and exposed US pressure on smaller governments.

Mexico wants explanation, Chile says it's "resolved"

The Mexican government has acknowledged that it sent a letter to the US administration in December asking for an explanation of the spying. The outspoken former Mexican ambassador to the UN, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, told the Associated Press that Washington had violated international law and Mexico should file a formal complaint with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in addition to seeking an explanation. Aguilar Zinser was recalled as Mexico's UN ambassador in November for saying the US treated its southern neighbor like its "back yard." He was at the UN when the alleged spying would have taken place (see SourceMex, 2003-11-19).

"It was very obvious to the countries involved in the discussion on Iraq that we were being observed and that our communications were probably being tapped," Aguilar Zinser said. "The information was being gathered to benefit the United States." Aguilar Zinser and other officials of the middle-six countries have mentioned occasions on which those states held secret meetings to form alternate proposals to allow the UN weapons inspections teams in Iraq more time.

Even though only they were supposed to know about the proposal, US officials called ambassadors the day after such a meeting to halt the advance of the proposal. Aguilar Zinser claims the intervention could have only come as a result of secret surveillance of the meetings where the diplomats were working on the compromise.

Chilean government representatives seem to be taking a more cautious tack on the issue. Patricio Santamaria, a spokesman for Chile's Ministry of the Secretary-General of Government, said the issue "was resolved via diplomatic channels, with the reserve it merits." "We made our rights clear in a responsible manner before the different interests that could be linked to the affair. We received explanations, and the matter was resolved," said Santamaria.

Ex-ambassador to the UN Juan Gabriel Valdes confirmed that Chile's diplomatic office was spied on in the days prior to the US invasion. "We called on the technical services to verify whether the telephones of the Chilean UN mission were tapped," he recalled. "They responded with a positive result. In effect, we confirmed that the great majority of the telephones were tapped." Chile is a nonpermanent member of the Security Council and at the time of the Iraq debate held the rotating chair for the council.

The issue sparked strong anti-war protests in Chile when it first came to light. The disclosure of the "dirty tricks" memo caused serious diplomatic difficulties for the countries involved and in particular the government in Chile, which demanded an immediate explanation from Britain and the US. The Chilean public is deeply sensitive to dirty tricks by the US intelligence services, which are still held responsible for the 1973 overthrow of the socialist government of former President Salvador Allende (1970-1973).

In the days that followed the disclosure, the Chilean delegation in New York distanced itself from the draft second resolution, leading the US to give up on plans to go down the UN route. Chile and Mexico initially wavered on supporting the war but eventually opposed the resolution. British and US officials have declined to comment on the espionage charge. "We don't comment on allegations concerning intelligence matters," State Department spokesperson Brenda Greenberg said Feb. 12.

British whistle-blower cleared

Some observers are taking the British government's decision not to prosecute Katherine Gun as an indication of guilt. She had faced charges under the Official Secrets Act, which prevents government employees from disclosing classified information, and had faced a minimum of two years in prison.

Gun released documents to The Observer of London last March that showed the US National Security Agency (NSA) was planning to create a "surge" of eavesdropping on the wavering countries in the Security Council and sought GCHQ assistance. The NSA told GCHQ that the particular targets of the "surge" were the delegates with the six crucial swing votes on the council.

A memo sent by Frank Koza, a senior NSA official, said the information from the eavesdropping would be used against the key UN delegations. In a statement when she was charged, Gun said, "Any disclosures that may have been made were justified because they exposed serious illegality and wrongdoing on the part of the US government which attempted to subvert our own security services.

Secondly, they could have helped prevent widescale death and casualties among ordinary Iraqi people and UK forces in the course of an illegal war." Gun, a former Mandarin translator at the top-

secret GCHQ surveillance center, became a cause celebre, attracting support from human and civil rights organizations and actor Sean Penn.

The Observer remarked that her specific expertise suggested that British and US intelligence services were also spying on China, one of the permanent members of Security Council. The group Liberty helped in Gun's defense and a spokesperson for the group, Mark Littlewood, condemned the Official Secrets Act and called for its reform. "As you can see, [the government] can operate with impunity. People who dare to reveal this type of information are essential for democracy."

Martin Bright, the reporter who first released the memo for The Observer, said that perhaps the strategy of Washington and London was to not give an opinion on the matter and let the news die down on its own, "but we won't let that happen."

France praises Chile's pre-war stance

Catherine Colonna, spokeswoman for French President Jacques Chirac, told the Chilean press that France considered Chile's position before the war "exemplary." Santiago denied support for the US intervention, a position France shared. Colonna gave the opinion at the end of a meeting between Chile's President Ricardo Lagos and President Chirac. She identified the relationship between the two countries as "excellent."

Chile has told the UN it is ready to provide cooperation with the international body in the effort to set up an Iraqi electoral process.

"We have expressed to Secretary General Kofi Annan our will to collaborate and our support in the electoral process in whichever moment it is necessary," said Heraldo Munoz, Chilean ambassador to the UN. He said that Chile could help with such efforts thanks to its broad experience during its democratic transition after Gen. Augusto Pinochet's 1973-1990 dictatorial regime. Munoz reiterated his country's backing for the UN's electoral mission, which is currently in Iraq evaluating the possibility of holding direct elections before June 30.

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