New Arrests, Indictments In 40-Year-Old Case Of Slain Chilean Singer VÃctor Jara

Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
New Arrests, Indictments In 40-Year-Old Case Of Slain Chilean Singer Víctor Jara

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Category/Department: Chile
Published: 2013-02-22

Protected for nearly four decades by a thick wall of military secrecy, a handful of former Chilean soldiers—including a retired Army lieutenant now living in the US—are finally being called to answer for the 1973 torture and murder of famed folk singer Víctor Jara.

The musician, who was also an accomplished poet, theater director, and university professor, remains one of the most iconic victims of the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), which began on Sept. 11, 1973, with a bloody coup against the government of President Salvador Allende (1970-1973). Allende, Latin America’s first democratically elected Marxist leader, died during the coup. Jara, a vocal Allende supporter, was shot to death several days later while being detained—along with several thousand other supposed leftists—in a makeshift Santiago prison camp in what was then known as the Estadio Chile. The stadium was later renamed in Jara’s honor (NotiSur, Sept. 12, 2003).

Impossible to pursue during the dictatorship, inquiries into the circumstances of Jara’s death would have to wait until after Chile’s return to democracy in 1990. Even then, cases involving the regime’s many human rights violations remained mostly off limits. It was not until the next decade that such investigations, the Jara case included, would finally start gaining a bit of traction.

In 2008, the investigating judge leading the Jara inquiry, Juan Eduardo Flores, secured his first and only conviction: against retired Col. Mario Manriquez, the Estadio Chile prison camp’s commanding officer. Flores accepted that Manriquez did not actually shoot the singer, but—figuring it was basically impossible at that point to determine who did—closed the case, much to the chagrin of Jara’s widow, Joan Jara Turner.

Jara Turner, a former ballet dancer who moved to Chile from Britain in the 1950s, refused to give up. Together with other members of the Fundación Víctor Jara, a Santiago-based nonprofit she set up in 1993, Jara Turner collected enough new evidence to convince Judge Flores to reopen the case. Five years later, as Chile prepares to mark the 40th anniversary of the coup, those efforts appear to suddenly be paying major legal dividends.

In late December, Miguel Vásquez, the investigating judge who is handling the case, made international headlines by issuing indictments and arrest warrants against eight ex-Army personnel accused of direct involvement in Jara’s murder. Judge Vásquez charged six of the men with complicity. The other two—the retired Col. Hugo Sánchez Marmonti and Pedro Barrientos Núñez, an Army lieutenant at the time—face the more serious charge of felony murder.

"[News of the indictments] hit me hard. It was a feeling of incredulity toward all that was happening. But we’re trying to be cautious since there have been so many false leads before regarding Víctor’s death," Jara Turner told the Argentine daily Clarín. "We’re feeling hopeful, but we know there’s a lot more to do."
**Russian roulette**

Six of the accused turned themselves in to military police in January. The two exceptions were former Lt. Col. Roberto Souper Onfray, who is reportedly in a rest home and suffers from Alzheimer’s disease, and Pedro Barrientos, who lives in the US in the state of Florida. Barrientos moved to the US in 1990, shortly after Pinochet stepped down.

Hoping to force Barrientos’ return to Chile, Judge Vásquez filed an extradition request last month with Chile’s Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ). The high court approved the request on Jan. 30. It will now be up to authorities in the US to decide whether the 64-year-old retired lieutenant—who is a naturalized US citizen—should be allowed to stay put or be shipped south to face prosecution.

Barrientos denies he had anything to do with Jara’s death. "I don’t have to face justice because I haven’t killed anyone," he insisted during a brief exchange last year with a reporter from Chilevisión. A news team from the Chilean television station tracked Barrientos down at his home in Deltona, Florida, about 64 km northeast of Orlando. "I've never been in Estadio Chile. I'm not familiar with it. And I didn’t even know there was a singer named Jara at that time."

A former Army conscript who served as "a type of bodyguard" to Barrientos during the initial days of the military takeover in 1973 insists otherwise. The conscript, 55-year-old José Paredes, claims Barrientos was not only present at the time of Jara’s death but was the person who first shot the singer. Paredes said that Barrientos used his sidearm to play Russian roulette with the prisoner, eventually discharging a bullet in Jara’s head. Barrientos then ordered Paredes and another conscript to turn their machine guns on Jara, who was convulsing on the ground.

Paredes, the key witness in the Jara case, kept his knowledge of the events secret for decades but, following his arrest in 2009, decided to offer a full confession. Autopsy reports on Jara’s corpse, which was exhumed that same year, seem to corroborate the ex-conscript’s story. Jara was shot at least 44 times, including once in the head. Jara’s captors are also believed to have used gun handles to shatter the musician’s hands.

"**It wouldn't be right**"

The Pinochet regime is estimated to have carried out at least 3,000 politically motivated killings. Many victims simply "disappeared." Thousands more were arrested, incarcerated, and—as the government-backed Comisión Nacional sobre la Detención Política y la Tortura underscored in a hallmark 2004 report—tortured. The Valech Report, as the commission’s findings were called, confirmed some 27,000 instances of torture (NotiSur, Nov. 19, 2004).

Unlike the families of Chile’s many desaparecidos—victims who were whisked away by military authorities never to be seen or heard from again—Joan Jara Turner was at least able to see and then bury her dead husband, thanks to the risky intervention of a sympathetic civil registry official.

Less than a week after the 1973 coup, Jara’s lifeless body was discovered thrown near some railroad tracks not far from Santiago’s Cementerio Municipal. Police took the corpse to the Instituto Médico Legal (IML), where several hundred bodies of other victims of the military repression had already collected. Héctor Herrera Olguín, a civil registry clerk who had been assigned to the IML just days before, recognized Jara and took it upon himself to double check the identity of the corpse using fingerprint records. He also tracked down Jara Turner’s address and, unbeknown to anyone, went
to her home, notified her of her husband’s death, and helped her recover the body. Herrera later went into exile, as did Jara Turner. The two kept their secret for more than 30 years.

"I saw his body. I saw the condition he was in. They can't lie to me," Jara Turner told Clarín. Asked how she reacted after seeing images on television of the eight men recently indicted for her husband’s death, Jara Turner said she felt more "disgust" than hate. "It was terrible, really powerful, seeing them happy and lying, saying they’d never been in the stadium."

Jara Turner is crossing her fingers that the US State Department will assist in the case by eventually granting Judge Vásquez’s extradition request for Barrientos. She said she expects nothing, however, from the administration of Chilean President Sebastián Piñera. "I don’t want the [Piñera] government to make any official statements or to say that they want justice. I don’t want them to have that privilege," Jara Turner said. "It wouldn’t be right. There are people in this administration who were involved with Pinochet in the coup conspiracy."

-- End --