8-28-2015

Chile’s Dictatorship-Era Spy Chief Manuel Contreras Dead At 86

Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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

Recommended Citation
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14359

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.
Chile’s Dictatorship-Era Spy Chief Manuel Contreras Dead At 86

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Category/Department: Chile
Published: 2015-08-28

The death earlier this month of Gen. Manuel Contreras, a notorious secret-police boss and unrepentant human rights abuser, coupled with legal developments in a number of decades-old criminal cases, have shed new light on the dark and still haunting legacy of the dictatorship of Chile’s Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990).

On Aug. 7, nearly nine years after Pinochet passed away at age 91 (NotiSur, Jan. 5, 2007), Contreras, 86, followed his former boss to the grave. Both men died of natural causes, and, in both cases, the deaths prompted spontaneous street celebrations. Outside the Santiago hospital where Contreras had been treated since September 2014 for kidney problems and other serious health issues, critics of the 17-year military regime poured sparkling wine and waved flags.

Unlike Pinochet, who was accused but never convicted for the numerous human rights abuses committed under his command, Contreras was sentenced repeatedly for his crimes, most recently on July 29, when he received 15 years for the disappearance in 1974 of a university student and 20 years for the 1975 torture and killings of six members of a family, including a pregnant woman.

Altogether, the deceased general racked up more than 520 years of sentences for killings and other abuses committed during his tenure (1973-1977) as head of the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (DINA), a secret-police force responsible for much of the state terrorism unleashed in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 1973, coup, which propelled Pinochet to power and ousted the democratically elected left-wing government of President Salvador Allende (1970-1973).

Contreras was also a key organizer behind Operation Condor, a coordinated effort by the intelligence arms of various South American dictatorships to track down and assassinate political opponents (NotiSur, June 1, 2001). Victims included Gen. Carlos Prats, a Chilean Army commander who served briefly as interior minister under Allende, and Orlando Letelier, another Allende-era minister (NotiSur, June 2, 1995). Both went into exile after the coup (Prats fled to Buenos Aires, Argentina; Letelier went to Washington, DC), and both were killed by car bombs—in 1974 and 1976, respectively (NotiSur, Jan. 26, 1996, and Dec. 1, 2000).

"Manuel Contreras will go down in history as a criminal and will always be remembered as a criminal," Partido Socialista (PS) Sen. Juan Pablo Letelier, the son of Orlando Letelier, told reporters following news of the former DINA head’s death. The administration of President Michelle Bachelet, also a member of the PS, said in an unsigned statement that Contreras was "one of the darkest characters in our history."

The death prompted reactions from human rights advocates as well. Attorney Carmen Hertz, in an interview with Radio ADN, called Contreras a "repressor" and said he was "emblematic of the policy of extermination and state terrorism that the dictatorship implemented against a whole sector of Chilean society it tried to eliminate."
**Caso Berrios**

Exactly one week after Contreras passed away, a second general with links to Operation Condor also died—in this case by his own hand. Hernán Ramírez Rurange committed suicide after Chile’s Corte Suprema, on Aug. 11, sentenced the retired military officer to 20 years for his role in the 1995 kidnapping and assassination in Uruguay of former DINA agent and chemistry expert Eugenio Berrios.

Ramírez Rurange was one of 14 Chilean and Uruguayan military men sentenced in relation to the Berrios affair, which differs from other Operation Condor cases in that it targeted a fellow right-wing military operative—presumably as a way to ensure his silence—rather than a leftist political opponent.

During his time with DINA, Berrios was tasked with developing sarin gas (a potent nerve agent) and other deadly chemicals used by the secret-police force. He fled Chile in 1991 after being called to testify in the Orlando Letelier assassination case. His lifeless body was discovered four years later on a beach near Montevideo. He had been shot in the back of the head.

One of the other Chilean officers implicated in the murder, Arturo Silva Valdés, is currently on the lam. The fugitive, a 61-year-old retired Army major who served for a time as Pinochet’s security chief and later worked as a bodyguard for Augustín Edwards, the owner of the conservative daily El Mercurio, is considered dangerous given his training as an accomplished sharpshooter.

**Caso Quemados**

The developments in the Berrios affair come just weeks after a judge ordered multiple arrests in another iconic human rights case, Caso Quemados (case of the burned people), which dates back to 1986 but is being revisited thanks to revealing testimony from a former Army conscript who witnessed the events in question.

The incident took place during a pro-democracy protest in Santiago, where soldiers seized two young participants—Carmen Gloria Quintana, 18, a university student, and Rodrigo Rojas, 19, a photographer—allegedly doused them in gasoline, and lit them on fire (NotiSur, March 14, 1997). The soldiers then loaded the victims into a truck, drove them out of the city, and dumped them in an abandoned lot. Passersby discovered the pair and helped get them to a hospital. Quintana somehow survived, despite extensive second- and third-degree burns. Rojas, a US resident who had come to Chile a few months earlier to document events in his birth country, died (NotiSur, July 7, 1987).

Military officials have long claimed that the burning happened accidentally. But in testimony given late last year—and made public in early July—ex-conscript Fernando Guzmán said Quintana and Rojas were intentionally torched. Guzmán’s testimony prompted the judge overseeing the case to order the arrests of a dozen former soldiers, including the commander of the patrol, Pedro Fernández Dittus, who was charged July 30 with both aggravated and attempted homicide (NotiSur, March 14, 1997).

Quintana, a psychologist and activist, underwent numerous surgeries to recover from the attack. She currently serves as a scientific attaché with the Chilean Embassy in Ottawa, Canada. Quintana praised Guzmán for breaking the military’s "pact of silence" and called on others to follow his lead.

"It is the moment for the armed forces to break with their past, to come clean and hand over all
those responsible [in human rights crimes]," she said. "Not just the [low-level] conscripts and those
who carried out the orders."

President Bachelet made a similar plea during an event in late July. "Enough with the silence," she
said. "There are people who known the truth about many cases that are still unresolved. Chile asks
them to follow the example of the conscript Fernando Guzmán, to help repair all the pain."

**Caso Degollados**

Truth commissions set up after Chile’s return to democracy concluded that Pinochet forces tortured
some 29,000 people and killed more than 3,000 (NotiSur, Oct. 9, 2009). Approximately one-third of
the killings were forced "disappearances." The bulk of those abuses took place during the early
years of the dictatorship, before Pinochet, under pressure from the US government, dissolved DINA
and removed Contreras from his powerful post.

Caso Quemados was something of an exception in that regard, as was Caso Degollados (slit-throat
case), a 1985 atrocity committed by members of the Carabineros police force (NotiSur, July 23,
1993). The victims in the case were three Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh) activists—Santiago
Nattino, an artist; Manuel Guerrero, a teacher; and Jose Manuel Parada, a sociologist—who were
abducted, killed, and dumped near the main Santiago airport. The perpetrators sliced the throats of
the victims, whose bodies also showed signs of torture.

The case forced Gen. César Mendoza, a member of the original post-coup military junta, to resign as
director general of the Carabineros. It also resulted, a decade later, in life sentences for a number of
police officers.

On Aug. 12, the Corte Suprema decided to grant probation to one of the former Carabineros,
Alejandro Saez, who had served 20 years. The decision drew complaints from rights groups and
family members of the victims. "My soul hurts today, it’s broken," Javiera Parada, the daughter of
José Manuel, wrote on her Twitter account. "I want to believe in our country, but days like today
make it very hard."

-- End --