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Operation Condor

United States Department of Defense

By the early 1970s, Latin American society was deeply polarized over such fundamental questions as the role of the state in economic development, diplomatic relations with revolutionary Cuba, and the definition of national identity itself. These divisions were brought to the forefront especially in Chile, following the narrow electoral victory of Marxist President Salvador Allende in September 1970. Three years later, Allende was overthrown in a violent coup led by General Augusto Pinochet and supported by the United States (see Documents No. 103 and 105). By 1976, every country in South America with the exception of Colombia and Venezuela was ruled by a military regime that pursued so-called "dirty wars" against groups and individuals seen as threats to domestic political stability, often with the encouragement of the United States. In November 1975, military officers from Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay met in Santiago, Chile to formalize a system of shared information exchange among their intelligence organizations, focusing on "persons and organizations connected directly or indirectly with Marxism." The project, code-named "Operation Condor," extended the dirty wars across international borders and eventually counted on the cooperation of Brazil, Ecuador and Peru. Among Operation Condor's targets were such high-profile exiled members of the political opposition as Orlando Letelier, Salvador Allende's foreign minister, who was killed along with his coworker, U.S. citizen Ronni Moffitt, in a car bombing organized by Chilean security forces in downtown Washington, D.C. on September 21, 1976. What follows is a report, written ten days after the Letelier assassination, by the legal attaché (not identified by name) in the U.S. embassy in Buenos Aires, on what he had learned about Operation Condor from his sources in the Argentine government. Evidently, the author was unaware that Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger and his deputies in the State Department not only knew about Condor, but since August had already been discussing the advisability of

Source: U.S. Embassy (Buenos Aires), "Special Operations Forces," U.S. Department of Defense Intelligence Information Report No. 6 804 0334 76 (Secret), 1 October 1976. Facsimile at National Security Archive Web site, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

warning the military leaders of Argentina, Chile and Uruguay against carrying out murders beyond their borders.

"Operation Condor" is the code name given for intelligence collection on "leftists," Communists and Marxists in the Southern Cone Area. It was recently established between cooperating intelligence services in South America in order to eliminate Marxist terrorist activities in member countries with Chile reportedly being the center of operations. Other participating members include: Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and Bolivia. In addition, Brazil has apparently tentatively agreed to provide intelligence input for Operation Condor. Members showing the most enthusiasm to date have been Argentina, Uruguay and Chile. These three countries have engaged in joint operations, primarily in Argentina, against terrorists [sic] targets. During the week of 20 September 1976, the Director of the Argentine Army Intelligence Service traveled to Santiago to consult with his Chilean counterparts on Operation Condor...

During the period 24-27 September 1976, members of the Argentine State Secretariat for Information (SIDE), operating with officers of the Uruguayan Military Intelligence Service carried out operations against the Uruguayan Terrorist organization, the OPR-33 in Buenos Aires. As a result of this joint operation, SIDE officials claimed that the entire OPR-33 infrastructure in Argentina has been eliminated. A large volume of U.S. currency was seized during the combined operation.

A third and reportedly very secret phase of "Operation Condor" involves the formation of special teams from member countries who are to carry out operations to include assassinations against terrorist or supporters of terrorist organizations. For example, should a terrorist or a supporter of a terrorist organization from a member country be identified, a special team would be dispatched to locate and surveil [sic] the target. When the location and surveillance operation has terminated, a second team would be dispatched to carry out an operation against the target. Special teams would be issued false documentation from member countries, [and] could be composed either of individuals from one member nation or of persons from various member nations. Source stated that team members would not be commissioned or non-commissioned officers of the armed forces, but rather "special agents." Two European countries, specifically mentioned for possible operations under the third phase were France and Portugal.

A special team has apparently been organized in Argentina for use in "Operation Condor." They are members of the Argentine Army Intelligence Service and the State Secretariat for Information. They are reportedly structured much like a U.S. Special Forces Team with a medic (doctor), demolition expert, etc. They are apparently being prepared for action in phase three.

More and more is being heard about "Operation Condor" in the southern cone. Military officers who, heretofore, had been mum on the subject have begun to talk openly about it. A favorite remark is that, "one of their colleagues is out of [the] country because he is flying like a condor."