

Evidence Indicates Murder of U.N.

12-14-76
By Dan Griffin

Washington Post Staff Writer

A United Nations official found dead last summer in Santiago, Chile, was beaten or tortured to death and the Chilean authorities have covered the case up as an accident, according to evidence the United Nations has received.

U.N. staff members in Chile have criticized the international organization for not taking any vigorous action in the five months since Carmelo Soria Espinosa died. They say they fear that they will suffer reprisals for having aided Soria's family.

In New York, Erick Suy, U.N. under secretary for legal affairs, said that the United Nations has been "in constant contact" with Chile's ambassador and foreign minister, demanding a "full, detailed and thorough report" of the circumstances surrounding Soria's death in mid-July.

He said that Chile is investigating the case but has given no indication of when the investigation will be completed, and he expressed a surprise at home of the details of the coroner's report, which a representative of The Washington Post has seen. Suy said he hopes that publicity may help speed the Chilean investigation of the Soria case.

Among the elements provoking an investigation are Soria's time of death and the condition of his body, sources say.

Although doctors say that some of his injuries would have caused almost instant death, the coroner's findings indicate that Soria died nearly 24 hours after his car plunged into a water-filled irrigation canal.

Moreover, three doctors questioned separately about the coroner's findings say that the multiple injuries Soria suffered are more consistent with strangulation and beating than with an automobile accident, while the condition of his car after the accident suggests that he was not in it when it ran down a steep slope into the canal.

When the widow and children of Soria pressed for an investigation into the circumstances of his death, they were put under surveillance and received threatening phone calls.

They left Chile at the end of September and now live in Spain, and according to a U.N. document, "The staff members who tried to help them in their efforts (to get a thorough investigation) are suffering the same fate" of surveillance and threats.

At the time of his death in mid-July, Soria, 54, was chief of publications of the Latin American Demographic Center (CELADE), a division of the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin

Official, Cover-Up in Chile

America.

Spanish-born, and a leftist, he had emigrated to Chile in 1947 because he felt that it was the "most democratic country in the world," according to his family. Although he held Chilean citizenship as well as Spanish, under the agreement between the Chilean government and the United Nations he had diplomatic immunity.

Nonetheless, he was under open surveillance by Chile's National Intelligence Directorate (DINA) for some months before he died, his family and associates say.

They gave the following account of his death and the incident surrounding it:

On Wednesday, July 14, Soria left his office at the usual time, a little after p.m., for the 7/ minute drive home. A few minutes later, an acquaintance saw him driving his white Volkswagen near his home. Since he was a man of habit, his wife became concerned when he did not arrive at his usual hour, and family members began calling hospitals to see if he had had an accident.

About 2 a.m. July 15, the hour Chile's curfew begins, residents in Santiago's northern Conchalí district heard the sound of a car crashing down a steep 180-foot incline that leads to a deep irrigation canal. The next afternoon, police found Soria's car upside down in the canal; on the bank, near the car, were Soria's U.N. passport, his Chilean identification card and his scarf stained with blood. There was no body.

An examination of the car showed that the doors were "hermetically closed," the roof had been crushed to within six to eight inches of the seat backs. Parts of the car—the radio, the front passenger seat and the bottom of the rear seat—had been carefully removed without damaging any of the connections.

The insurance report on the car also noted that the glove compartment was locked but its cardboard bottom had been torn open and that the car's tools "were with the carabinieri on guard at a bridge downstream." The report ends: "The motor was in its place."

Since no body was found, a police official ordered the canal drained. Just before noon the next day, July

16, Soria's body was found face down in the water about half a mile downstream from the wrecked car. His suit jacket and the lower portion of the car's back seat, untorn, were found next to the body.

There were reportedly no brake or skid marks on the road where Soria's car went off into the canal.

The official autopsy report, which has not been made public, said that Soria died of injuries to the cervical area of the spine and massive brain hemorrhages.

The three physicians who reviewed the coroner's findings said that although an automobile accident might produce some of the injuries Soria suffered, it would not be likely to produce the combination. More likely, they concluded, is that he was bound, beaten about the head and chest, strangled slowly and finally killed by sharp blows to the back of the neck.

Among the symptoms they pointed to were throat injuries, hemorrhages of the lungs and contusions consistent with beating. They said that there were of the sorts of cuts and scrapes

usually found on accident victims, especially those thrown from a car. Sonia's clothes were not torn.

Although Soria's associates say that he did not drink, because of a medical problem, his blood showed a high level of alcohol.

The doctor who performed the autopsy told family members that Soria was dead when he entered the water and that his body had been in the water for less than 12 hours, meaning that his car had been in the canal for at least 22 hours before his body was.

The head of Chile's criminal investigations bureau told the press that the case was closed as an "accidental death" and that Soria had died as a

result of driving his car off a cliff while intoxicated.

A criminal court judge appointed to investigate the case refused, however, to characterize the death as accidental, and her investigation is continuing.

Soria, who was a friend of the late Pablo Neruda, the Communist Chilean poet, had held an important position in a government-owned publishing house during the Allende government, which was overthrown by a rightist coup in September 1973.

Many of his friends were leftists intellectuals and professional, and associates say that he had spoken of being followed by DINA agents. Nonetheless, they say, he did not seem to feel that he was in any danger.

Early this year, some members of his staff had been detained and questioned about Soria's beliefs and activities, and one associate who had worked with him during the Allende year is reported to have been tortured and suffered a permanent loss of hearing during one such session.

Even before Chile's controlled press published news of Soria's death, the family reportedly received phone calls saying, "This is what happens for being leftist."

The following month, an in-law of the Soria disappeared, and since the Eoria family went to Spain some U.N. staff members' homes and offices in Santiago have been searched by Chilean authorities.