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'Condor': South American Assassins

The secret police of at least six South American military regimes have been running a joint undercover operation whose function is to assassinate common enemies in foreign countries.

The secret organization, headquartered in Chile, is called "Operation Condor," after the baldheaded vulture of the Andes. Though membership has varied since Condor's formation in 1976, other member nations have included Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

Although Condor functions as an intelligence-gathering organization to keep track of "leftist" exiles and other opponents of the ruling juntas, its "Phase Three" section is the Mafia-like enforcement arm, according to top-secret documents and other sources.

The special section "involves the formation of special teams from member countries assigned to travel anywhere in the world to nonmember countries to carry out 'sanctions'—including assassination—against Condor enemies," according to a "Top Secret-Sensitive" report of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

One "Phase Three" team is charged with drawing up the Condor "hit list" in a particular country. Then a second team is dispatched to find the targeted victims and watch them. Finally, a third team, drawn from one or more member police agencies, is sent to carry out the "sanction" decided upon.

So far Condor apparently has failed to establish an outpost in the United States, but an attempt was made at one point to open a station in Miami, according to the secret report. The CIA got wind of the plan and notified the State Department. A formal protest to the governments involved was considered, but was vetoed by Henry Kissinger, then secretary of state.

Instead, U.S. disapproval of the proposed Condor station was relayed quietly to the Chilean secret police, DINA, which seemed to be the moving force behind Condor.

The outpost was never set up, but this may not have stopped Condor from doing its dirty work in the United States. In September, 1976, the prominent Chilean exile, Orlando Letelier, was blown to bits with a young American associate as they were driving past the Chilean chancery on Washington's Embassy Row.

The confessed hit man claimed DINA had hired him, and a secret FBI report at the time stated: "It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the recent assassination of Orlando Letelier . . . may have been carried out as a third phase of 'Operation Condor.'"

Quick action by the CIA and the French and Portuguese governments prevented similar Condor strikes on another occasion, sources told our associate Dale Van Atta. After the assassinations of the Bolivian ambassador, a Uruguayan attaché in Paris and a Chilean diplomat in the Middle East,

a Condor first team had selected three prominent European leftists as targets for retaliation.

But while the second team was looking for the targets, the CIA discovered that the assassinations were to occur in France and Portugal and notified those governments. French and Portuguese authorities tipped off the intended victims, then called the Condor nations' representatives on the carpet "to warn them to call off the action," according to the secret report. It added: "They did—after denying that it had ever been planned."

Because of worldwide outrage at the Letelier murder—three top officials of DINA were indicted in the United States, but extradition has been refused—the Chilean president, Gen. Augusto Pinochet, dissolved the sinister police force in 1977. Its replacement agency is primarily an intelligence-gathering agency, CIA sources said.

But others are not so sure that DINA's ghost has been laid to rest. Chilean undercover agents still have been able to enter the United States on false passports to buy electronic eavesdropping equipment and the secret report notes that "persons accompanying President Pinochet to the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty used false passports."

The report concludes, "What is clear, is that DINA and Condor possess both the motive and capability to harm United States residents."