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Paraguayan Links Chile's DINA to Letelier Slaying

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An FBI agent last week quietly slipped into the capital of Paraguay, Asuncion, and conducted a secret interview with a high-ranking Paraguayan official that establishes the crucial link between the Chilean secret police and the assassination of Orlando Letelier.

This "Paraguayan connection" is another piece of evidence the United States has collected showing that the secret police of four right-wing Latin American governments — Chile, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay — have been secretly collaborating for several years in organized operations against exiles and political enemies from each country, even to the extent of cooperating in assassination conspiracies.

The interview with the unnamed Paraguayan official by FBI Special Agent Calvin Clegg, according to sources close to the probe, is expected to wrap up the Justice Department's case against DINA, the secret police organization of Chile.

While officials of the State and Justice departments and the FBI would not comment on the "Paraguayan connection," the deposition of the Paraguayan official was essential for the indictments a federal grand jury is expected to return, sometime after July 25, against former DINA chief Gen. Manuel Contreras Sepulveda.

Contreras, one of the best friends of Chile's President Augusto Pinochet, was forced into retirement recently because of exposes of the DINA plot with Cuban exiles to kill Letelier.

THE "PARAGUAYAN connection" involved official collaboration between the governments of Chile

and Paraguay to get U.S. visas for two DINA agents under false names and with phony Paraguayan passports.

There is no evidence, officials emphasized, that the Paraguayan official or his government knew what the DINA murder team planned to do in the United States. It is probable that Paraguay did not know anything except that Contreras had asked one of his counterparts for help in getting the visas in what might be called a visa-laundering operation.

The State Department said that the Paraguayan government had cooperated fully with the investigators.

But the Clegg mission, which was arranged in large part by the State Department and Ambassador to Paraguay Robert White, resulted in the disclosure that the U.S. government has long known about the collaboration of right-wing governments in southern Latin America.

For several years, American officials have confirmed, Washington has known about the secret cooperation of the intelligence services of the four military governments in operations against exiles from each country.

EXISTENCE OF the four-nation cabal was known to the State Department and the CIA, according to well-informed official sources, for some time before the Sept. 21, 1976, assassination in Washington of the Chilean leftist politician and diplomat, Letelier.

But U.S. officials emphasized that they had never expected that there would be a political murder of a Latin dissident in the United States.

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It was after the investigation was begun into the Letelier murder by Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene M. Propper and the FBI that officials discovered the so-called "Paraguay connection." This was the August 1976 trip by two members of the Chilean secret police to Asuncion, where they tried, but failed, to obtain official U.S. visas with the aid of a high-ranking Paraguayan official by passing themselves off as Paraguayans.

Sources in two U.S. government agencies said it was one thing to know about the multinational secret police collaboration and another to discover that it had reached out to cause the death of two people in the heart of Washington, Letelier and his colleague, Ronni Karpen Moffitt.

INFORMATION available to U.S. officials about the four-nation secret police pact has been closely held and carries the highest security classification. In part, officials said, this is because the CIA had succeeded in penetrating one of the four secret police services and the cables containing reports on this penetration are accessible to only a handful of officials.

In August 1976, one month before Letelier's car was blown up, Washington learned that Michael V. Townley, 36, an American expatriate living in Chile and working for DINA, and Capt. Armando Fernandez Larios of the Chilean army had gone to the Paraguayan capital.

There, with the aid of the unnamed Paraguayan official, they applied at the U.S. consulate for official U.S. visas. Reportedly one of the Paraguayan clerks in the consulate noted that the applicants were obviously not Paraguayans.

Both the Paraguayan woman consular employee and the Paraguayan official who requested the U.S. visas for the two Chileans would be important witnesses at the expected trial of Townley and three or more Cuban exiles, investigators said.

U.S. officials have realistically determined that, even if indicted, no Chilean

officers will be extradited under the Chilean military government for a trial here.

COINCIDENTALLY, the U.S. ambassador to Paraguay in 1976 was George W. Landau, who is now ambassador to Chile. The applications came to Landau's attention through the embassy chain of command and he asked Washington for instructions.

The then-assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, Harry

Shlaudeman, now ambassador to Peru, was aware of the four-nation compact for secret police mutual assistance. Shlaudeman has told The Washington Star that he cabled back immediately to Asuncion the instructions to retrieve the visas issued to Townley and Fernandez in the invented names of "Juan Williams Rose" and "Alejandro Romeral Jara." Consular officials did manage to get the visas back and the photographs that appeared to be of no importance at the time were filed away.

It was this incident in Paraguay that gave U.S. authorities possession of photographs of Townley and Fernandez, alias Williams and Romeral, a month before Letelier was assassinated in downtown Washington. No one realized the significance of the Asuncion matter in August 1976, but it was remembered by several U.S. officials aware of the four-nation secret police arrangement as soon as they heard that Letelier had been killed by a bomb.

Tracing the Asuncion pair was not easy. At first, U.S. officials in Washington decided they would have to permit Propper, Assistant U.S. Attorney Larry Barcella and FBI Special Agent Clegg to have access to all State Department cable traffic regarding both the Letelier killing and the secret police agreement.

PROPPER, BARCELLA AND CLEGG have declined to comment on any aspect of the Latin secret police matter or the case, but it is now well established that the CIA's files and reports also were made available to the investigators.

In tracking down every application for U.S. visas made from several Latin capitals, investigators soon noted that men named "Williams" and "Romeral" had made similar applications in the Chilean capital, Santiago, after being turned down by the U.S. consulate in Asuncion.

But the mystery was that the photos of the two men in Santiago bore no resemblance to the two who applied for visas in Asuncion. And when U.S. investigators asked to see "Williams" and "Romeral," they were shown pictures of two men who bore no resemblance to the two of the same name who applied in Paraguay.

Subsequently, investigators learned that the applicants in Asuncion were really involved in the Letelier case while the applicants in Santiago essentially had been used as a smokescreen. The latter two had nothing to do with the Letelier case.

In fact, investigators learned that Townley came to the United States under one of many aliases he is known to have used, while Fernandez used still another name and passport.

This point caused considerable confusion at the early stages of the probe of Letelier's murder.

WHEN THE ASUNCION photos were published by The Star and then in Chile by the newspaper El Mercurio, the true identities of Townley and Fernandez were quickly made known by readers. Identifications were made both in Washington and Santiago by people who know Townley and Fernandez.

The important point for U.S. diplomats and intelligence officers was that the governments in Santiago, Buenos Aires, Montevideo and Asuncion were working together, at least on the secret police level.

All four countries of the so-called Cono del Sur (southern cone) have many citizens from the other nations living within their boundaries. Argentina, particularly, has many Paraguayans who, because of politics or economic pressures, leave their landlocked nation and go to live in Buenos Aires. Uruguayans and Argentines quite frequently cross and recross the Rio Plata estuary. A number of Chileans, either voluntarily or through fear, went to live in neighboring lands.

One of the most obvious cases of secret police terror was that of Gen. Carlos Prats, who was commander of Chile's army and defense minister until three weeks before the armed forces rose up against the elected Marxist regime of the late President Salvador Allende. Prats and his wife went into exile in Argentina but within a year they were killed by a bomb blast in Buenos Aires. This assassination occurred after Prats wrote a letter denouncing Pinochet as a traitor without parallel in Chile's history.

U.S. OFFICIALS carefully do not say that Argentina collaborated in the Prats murder. But the agreement among the four South American secret police forces, as U.S. officials understand it, would have permitted DINA agents to operate freely in Argentina.

Since the death of Letelier, there have been substantial changes in the region and U.S. officials say collaboration among the four dictatorships is no longer as close.

Relations between Chile and Argentina have cooled over the Beagle Channel territorial dispute.

Chile, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay were all condemned in varying degrees for human rights violations by the Organization of American States, although the four are now trying to improve their image on that score.

However, U.S. officials say, the investigation into Letelier's murder has shed so much light on the secret police forces of the Southern Cone countries that they have been heavily curbed in their operations.