

# CIA Had Covert Tie To Letelier Plotter

## *Contreras Masterminded Bombing*

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The CIA maintained relations with and made a one-time cash payment in the mid-1970s to a top Chilean intelligence official, Manuel Contreras, even though he was considered one of the country's major human rights violators, according to a new CIA report on covert agency operations in Chile.

The report, mandated in recent legislation and sent to Capitol Hill this week, provides extensive new detail about the CIA's activities in Chile after a 1973 coup that toppled Socialist President Salvador Allende and brought Gen. Augusto Pinochet to power, including the agency's relationship with Contreras and other human rights abusers.

"We made a conscious, determined effort to answer the questions we were asked [by Congress] fully, and it was tough," one senior U.S. intelligence official said in an interview yesterday. "The story that is reflected on Contreras is not an altogether happy one."

Contreras, the head of Pinochet's Directorate of National Intelligence, or DINA, was indicted by a U.S. grand jury in 1978 for masterminding the 1976 car bombing that killed a Chilean diplomat who served in Allende's cabinet, Orlando Letelier, and his American colleague Ronni Moffitt, on Washington's Embassy Row. He was ultimately convicted of the crime in Chile and remains in custody on a Chilean military base.

The report says the CIA maintained relations with Contreras from 1974 to 1977, having urged him "from the start" to refrain from human rights abuses. The relationship was maintained for official "liaison" purposes, the report says, even though the CIA considered him "the principal obstacle" to human rights re-



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**In 1970s, Manuel Contreras ran DINA, Chilean intelligence directorate, in regime under Gen. Augusto Pinochet.**

form in Chile as early as April 1975.

Despite those reservations, CIA officers in Chile recommended that "a paid relationship" with Contreras be established to take advantage of "his unique position and access to Pinochet," according to the report.

Although CIA headquarters rejected the proposal by over concerns about Contreras's "notorious" human rights record, the report says, a "miscommunication" between CIA headquarters and agency officers in Chile resulted in a one-time payment to Contreras.

The payment was made, senior intelligence officials explained, as a means of maintaining working relationships with DINA only after it was made clear to Contreras that he was "not popular in Washington" and that headquarters had rejected an ongoing paid relationship.

Rep. Maurice D. Hinchey (D-N.Y.), whose amendment to the fiscal 2000 Intelligence Authorization Act required the CIA to report on its covert activities in Chile, credited the agency for having done a "forthright job" in producing the 21-page document, but said

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"a number of important questions remain unanswered."

Hinchey said those questions make the further release of CIA covert action documents, now scheduled to take place next month, even more important. The Clinton administration had been planning to release hundreds of Chile documents last week under a special declassification project. President Clinton ordered after Pinochet's arrest in Britain in 1998.

But the release was postponed to allow for further declassification review after CIA Director George J. Tenet refused to release hundreds of Chile documents, saying it could jeopardize intelligence-gathering methods still employed by the agency.

Peter Kornbluh, a Chile expert at the nonprofit National Security Archive who has lobbied for full declassification of Chile documents, credited the CIA for candor in its new report. The document, he said, makes the clearest case to date that the agency, under orders from the Nixon administration, played an important role in supporting the Pinochet dictatorship. "This report is the genie out of the bottle," he said, "and it can't be put back in."

But Kornbluh said the report is "thin" in its description of CIA relations with Contreras and DINA. Kornbluh said he found the report remarkable in its conclusion that CIA officers in Chile proposed a paid relationship with Contreras in

1975 when they knew DINA was involved in plotting overseas assassinations of political opponents, such as Letelier.

Despite knowledge of the overseas assassination program, Kornbluh said, the CIA now reports that agency officials did not seek to question Contreras about "Operation Condor" until October 1976, after Letelier was assassinated.

"There is no doubt in my mind that Contreras's relationship with the CIA led him to believe that he could get away with an act of terrorism in the capital of the United States of America," Kornbluh said.

Samuel J. Buffone, an attorney for the Letelier and Moffitt families, added: "The fact that Contreras was on the CIA payroll, even given the explanation that it was a one-time payment, is something that should have been disclosed long ago."

Senior intelligence officials disputed Kornbluh's contention that the CIA tacitly encouraged Contreras to commit human rights abuses. The CIA maintained a formal liaison relationship with Contreras, they said, that was in no way "cordial and smooth."

After Letelier's assassination, they said, the CIA reported information pointing to Contreras's involvement and immediately began helping the Justice Department prosecute Contreras.