

2 Generals Convicted In Killing of Letelier

Contreras, Espinoza Get Jail Terms in Chile

11/13/93

By Don Podesta
Washington Post Foreign Service

SANTIAGO, Chile, Nov. 12—A judge today convicted two high-ranking officers in the murder of former Chilean foreign minister Orlando Letelier in Washington 17 years ago.

Letelier's sister, lawyer Fabiola Letelier, announced the verdict in the most important case left over from Chile's 16-year military dictatorship: retired general Manuel Contreras, who headed the secret police during the rule of army Gen. Augusto Pinochet, was sentenced to seven years in prison, and his subordinate, Brig. Gen. Pedro Espinoza, to six as the authors of the murder of Letelier. Espinoza, once director of operations for the feared National Directorate of Intelligence, is still on active duty.

The murder of Letelier came to symbolize the worst excesses of the military government after it seized power from Marxist president Salvador Allende in a bloody coup in September 1973. In the 1970s, more than 1,100 people disappeared or were killed and about 1 million Chileans went into exile.

Already among the most politically polarized countries in Latin America at the time, the human rights violations during the military government's war against leftist subversives threatened to leave Chilean society fractured indefinitely.

But today's verdict was issued in a transformed political climate. Only a month away from presidential elections, polls show that the vast majority of Chileans are happy with the current center-left government and that voters will opt to extend the stability that has characterized Christian Democratic President Patricio Aylwin's rule.

Judge Adolfo Banados announced this afternoon that he had issued a verdict but refused to disclose it publicly until the accused have been notified. Fabiola Letelier was shown the verdict as one of the parties in the case, and she revealed the out-

come to reporters in an impromptu press conference in the hallways of the court building.

Although Ms. Letelier had pressed for life sentences, she said she felt "profound satisfaction" at the outcome of the case.

"I consider this sentence to have great value because it shows justice in our country is possible," she said. "Today is a day of great hope for all Chileans." The convictions mark the first instance of military officers being brought to justice for violations of human rights during the dictatorship, according to Letelier, who mounted a 14-year crusade to keep the case alive.

The military government decreed an amnesty in 1978, and cases brought after that were tried in the military courts. But after Aylwin succeeded Pinochet in 1990, the Letelier case, specifically excluded from the amnesty, was moved to a civilian court. Banados brought his charges last year.

See CHILE, A22, Col. 1



Retired general Manuel Contreras, who headed DINA secret police, received seven-year jail term.