

12:00 04 Jan RTRS-FEATURE-With declassification, US washes hands of Pinochet

By Tiffany Woods

SANTIAGO (Reuters) - Three days after the United States released its last batch of declassified documents about its covert actions during Gen. Augusto Pinochet's 1973-1990 dictatorship in Chile, local comic strip "Felipe in the Traffic Jam" summed up many Chileans' feelings.

In the comic a boy asks, "Dad, do you know how I can get in touch with the White House or the CIA?"

"I don't have a clue, Son. Why?" his father asks.

"Because I have to write a paper about Chilean history," the son replies.

The comic strip is a jab at Washington, which ordered the papers declassified in 1999 after Pinochet's arrest in London. Two batches were released that year and the final tranche in November -- less than three weeks before a Chilean judge ordered the arrest and trial of the ex-dictator, now back in Chile.

The United States boxed up its dirty laundry and shipped it off to Chile, and now it gathers dust at the national library in Santiago in a rarely used room where the wooden floor squeaks.

Although some Chilean soldiers were far from being saints, the 1968-1991 documents portray Chile as a Cold War instrument of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's struggle to keep leftist ideologies from spreading. The release of the papers has allowed the United States to wash its hands of a shameful era.

On the other hand, they are embarrassing proof of how U.S. hegemony led it to help create a 17-year dictatorship during which more than 3,000 people are presumed to have been killed.

The United States has not apologized, merely saying that now the public "may judge for itself the extent to which U.S. actions undercut the cause of democracy."

"We cannot overlook the fact that these documents are proof of a clear and unacceptable U.S. intervention in our internal affairs," Chilean Foreign Minister Soledad Alvear said.

But the documents are nothing new, said Alejandro Salinas, director of human rights at the foreign ministry, who headed a team of some 15 people who combed the documents for evidence against violators of human rights.

In general the documents reiterate the findings of the 1975 Church report, which summarizes a U.S. congressional investigation, under then-Sen. Frank Church of Idaho, of covert action in Chile from 1963 to 1973.

FIRST STEPS

Although Washington opposed Salvador Allende's 1970-1973 presidency, which was Latin America's first elected Marxist government, it insists it did not instigate the Sept. 11, 1973, putsch that left Allende dead and Pinochet in power. But it admits it tried to foment a coup in 1970.

Washington meddled in Chilean affairs even as early as the 1960s, when it financed slightly more than half the Christian Democrats' successful 1964 presidential bid to ensure Allende's failure, the Church report said. The CIA mounted a massive scare campaign with images of Cuban firing squads and Soviet tanks.

But when Allende ran again in 1970 and was on the verge of winning, then U.S. President Richard Nixon instructed the CIA to play a direct role in organizing a military coup to prevent Allende's accession, the Church report said.

Two lines of action, Track I and Track II, were drawn up. The former initially sought to overthrow Allende by pressuring politicians, and the latter via military action, it said. But a Sept. 12, 1970, State Department memorandum said Chile's military, in its "customary state of flabby irresolution," did not have a stomach for a "cold-blooded" coup.

"This military establishment lacks cohesion and political purpose; its only real unifying instinct is to survive so as to enjoy minor privileges -- cars, houses, pensions and the like -- and dazzle parade ground audiences ... they would shrink from (the) prospect of having to shoot civilians," the memo said.

With U.S. encouragement or not, a coup was bound to take place eventually, said Brian Loveman, a historian at San Diego State University and author of several books on Chile. "Allende had lost control of his own Socialist Party," he said.

Although the United States initially supported Pinochet, it worried about human rights atrocities. Nevertheless, some CIA contacts were engaged in abuses, according to last year's Hinchey report, a review of CIA records required by an amendment sponsored by U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey, a New York Democrat.

The CIA even gave a one-time payoff to Manuel Contreras, once the head of Chile's now-disbanded DINA secret police, the report said. Contreras has denied it.

When Pinochet lost in a 1988 plebiscite that asked voters if he should stay in power, he threatened to have the armed forces seize the capital, a Jan. 1, 1989, U.S. Department of Defense document said. "Tension in the room was so high that the secretary general of the government collapsed from what turned out to be the first stage of a heart attack," it said.

DOING JUSTICE

Lawyers say some documents provide evidence of Pinochet's possible involvement in ordering the 1976 car bomb assassination of exiled Socialist Orlando Letelier in Washington.

"This is compelling evidence. We hope the United States will indict Pinochet and file an extradition request," said Sam Buffone, lawyer for the Letelier family.

The declassification led American Joyce Horman to file a lawsuit against Pinochet in Santiago in December for alleged homicide and torture of her husband, Charles Horman, a U.S. journalist whose body was drilled with seven bullet wounds.

She says he was killed in 1973 with CIA complicity because he knew too much about U.S. involvement in the overthrow of Allende, a view taken by the 1982 movie "Missing."

Documents say Pinochet knew of human rights abuses.

"Several army generals have approached President Augusto Pinochet and presented corroborated accounts of torture. ... In making any reforms in DINA, Pinochet will probably deal with its director, Juan Manuel Contreras, in a friendly manner because the two have had a close working relationship," a Jan. 31, 1975, CIA document said.

An April 1975 Defense Department report said: "Contreras has reported exclusively to and received orders only from President Pinochet."

But others, like the foreign ministry's Salinas, are skeptical. He doubts that some of the documents would stand up in court because sources are not revealed and because some reports are mere opinions. "The CIA might say a lot of things, but this does not mean they are true," Salinas said.

But even if the information does not put perpetrators behind bars, it does show that the United States walked a fine line between actor and bystander. As a result, the Hinchey report said, the CIA now reviews all contacts for potential involvement in such abuses. That is little consolation for Chile today.

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