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Operation Condor: Campaign by US-backed Latin American Dictators to Hunt Down, Torture and Murder Tens of Thousands of Opponents

By Bill Van Auken
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A trial that opened Tuesday in Buenos Aires is the first to consider the totality of crimes carried out under Operation Condor, a coordinated campaign by various US-backed Latin American dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s to hunt down, torture and murder tens of thousands of opponents of those regimes.

Condor was prosecuted in the name of a crusade against “terrorism.” Its methods in many ways prefigured the systematic and continuing crimes carried out by the US government decades later with its use of “extraordinary rendition,” torture and “targeted killings.”

The case will take up the disappearance and murder of 106 people, the greatest number of them (48) Uruguayans, but also Chileans, Paraguayans, Bolivians, Argentines and one Peruvian.

While other cases in both Spain and Italy have touched on the crimes carried out under Operation Condor, the Argentine trial is of far greater historic weight. This is the country in which an estimated 30,000 workers, students, left-wing activists, intellectuals and others targeted by the regime are believed to have been abducted and executed, and where the greatest number of killings of foreigners was carried out.

Those who organized Operation Condor included the military regimes in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Bolivia, and Paraguay. Peru and Ecuador also participated in some of the

operation's crimes. The US government, and in particular former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, provided crucial support for the bloody repression carried out under the mantle of Condor.

The lead defendants in the proceedings are former Argentine dictators Jorge Videla, 87, and Reynaldo Bignone, 85. Videla headed the Argentine junta from the 1976 coup until 1981, while Bignone was the chief of the right-wing military regime from 1982 to 1983. Both men, who have already been sentenced to life terms for crimes carried out by the dictatorship, will be joined in the dock by the ex-commander of Argentina's Third Army Corps, Luciano Benjamín Menéndez, also already sentenced to two life terms for forced disappearances, torture and murder.

Another 22 former members of the Argentine military and security forces are also being prosecuted in the trial, which judges said could be expected to last for up to two years. The only non-Argentine defendant is Manuel Cordero, an ex-colonel and intelligence officer in the Uruguayan army.

Legal proceedings surrounding the case began in the 1990s, when most crimes of the Argentine dictatorship were covered by amnesty laws passed after the end of military rule, promising the killers and torturers impunity. The cross-border operations of Operation Condor, however, were not covered by these decrees.

Among those who belong in the dock with Videla and Bignone, many of whom are dead, include former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, Paraguay's longtime ruler Alfredo Stroessner, Gen. Hugo Banzer of Bolivia, Generals Ernesto Geisel and Joao Baptista Figueiredo of Brazil and former Uruguayan rulers Jose Maria Bordaberry and Aparicio Mendez.

The Peruvian high court rejected Argentina's request for the extradition of former military ruler Francisco Morales Bermúdez.

The trial is unfolding under conditions in which the criminals of former dictatorships have escaped prosecution in a number of countries. It begins only weeks after Uruguay's supreme court struck down a law under which such prosecutions had begun in that country, a ruling that triggered angry mass demonstrations.

Meanwhile, in Brazil, where the first of the Southern Cone dictatorships backed by the CIA took power in 1964, the government of Workers Party President Dilma Rousseff has established a "truth commission" to gather information on the repression carried out during two decades of military rule, but none of those responsible has ever been prosecuted.

Carolina Varsky, an attorney representing Argentine and Uruguayan victims in the case, told the AFP news agency, "What we now must prove is the existence of an illicit association between the dictatorships of Argentina, Bolivia, Brail, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay to hunt down and eliminate opponents in any one of these countries, with the support of the United States."

She said that the evidence would include the testimony of survivors of the continental repression, some 500 of whom are expected to take the witness stand, as well as declassified documents, most of them from Washington.

It was on the basis of these incriminating documents that Argentine federal judge Rodolfo Canicoba Corral issued a formal request last August to the Obama administration's Justice

Department to make Henry Kissinger, US secretary of state between 1973 and 1977, available for questioning. The Justice Department did not even reply to the request.

One of the documents declassified by Washington over the past decade was a transcript of a June 1976 discussion in Santiago, Chile between Kissinger and the foreign minister of the Argentine dictatorship, Admiral Cesar Augusto Guzzetti.

The transcript, declassified in 2004, records Guzzetti spelling out the plans being developed under Operation Condor, claiming that there were 10,000 foreign “terrorists” in Argentina and similar problems throughout the Southern Cone, and that his regime was joining forces with those of Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia and Uruguay to “combat” them.

Kissinger’s response was to wish the dictatorship “success,” while advising, “If there are things that have to be done, you should do them quickly.”

Another document, declassified in 2010, establishes that Kissinger intervened in September 1976 to stop the issuance of diplomatic warnings to the US-backed dictators in Latin America not to organize “a series of international murders.”

Kissinger’s September 16, 1976 cable to his assistant secretary of state for Inter-American affairs, Harry Shlaudeman, ordered that “no further action be taken on this matter.” Five days later, a car bomb killed Chile’s former foreign minister, Orlando Letelier, a prominent opponent of the Pinochet dictatorship, and his American colleague, Ronni Karpen Moffitt, as they were riding past Washington, DC’s Embassy Row.

Kissinger’s order amounted to a green light for Letelier’s killing, which was organized by Michael Townley, who had served as an agent of both the CIA and Chile’s DINA intelligence agency, using anti-Castro Cuban operatives to carry out the assassination. Convicted for Letelier’s murder, Townley was jailed for little more than five years and then placed in the federal witness protection program and shielded from prosecution for his role in other Operation Condor murders. He continues to reside in the US under a new identity.

Manuel Cordero, the ex-Uruguayan military intelligence officer and only non-Argentine who is a defendant in the Operation Condor trial, has been identified by survivors of the Latin American state terror campaign as having been responsible for multiple disappearances and killings, including that of María Claudia García de Gelman, the daughter-in-law of the Argentine poet Juan Gelman.

Heavily armed men abducted María Claudia along with her husband Marcelo from their home in Buenos Aires in August 1976. The couple was taken to a clandestine detention center where they were tortured and Marcelo was executed with a gunshot to the head.

Seven months pregnant, Maria Claudia was transported across the border to Montevideo, Uruguay, where she was held until she gave birth and then murdered. Her daughter was handed over to an Uruguayan policeman.

Thanks to the relentless, quarter-century-long campaign by Juan Gelman to find his grandchild, María Macarena, who only learned her true identity at the age of 23, the case became emblematic of the crimes of Operation Condor.

The former Uruguayan colonel, Cordero, had gone into hiding in Brazil, but was extradited by a Brazilian court to Argentina in 2009.