

CHILE - Leaders of German Enclave "Colonia Dignidad" and Dictature's Intelligence Agency Charged with Human Rights Abuses

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IPS - During the 1973-1990 dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile, the regime's notorious secret police and a colony of German immigrants in southern Chile cooperated closely to commit human rights abuses, according to a Chilean judge, who indicted 18 members of the two organisations.

"We see Zepeda's decision as very positive," Lorena Pizarro, head of the Group of Families of the Detained/Disappeared, told IPS. "We hope that it will pave the way for learning the truth about the murders and forced disappearances committed in Colonia Dignidad," the German enclave.

Among those indicted Monday by Judge Jorge Zepeda were retired generals Manuel Contreras and Pedro Espinoza - the former heads of DINA (the secret police), who are already serving time for other human rights crimes. Also charged were two other retired DINA officers, Colonel Fernando Gómez and Major Armando Fernández Larios.

In 1987, Fernández Larios deserted from the Chilean army and flew to Washington, where he turned himself in to federal authorities seeking him for his involvement in the 1976 car-bomb assassination of former Chilean foreign minister Orlando Letelier in Washington.

Fernández Larios testified against Contreras and Espinoza, pleaded guilty as an "accessory", served a few months in prison, and then entered the federal witness protection programme. For the past several years he has reportedly been living under a new identity as a businessman in Miami, Florida.

The 84-year-old Paul Schäfer, who founded the German agricultural commune in southern Chile known as Colonia Dignidad in 1961, was arrested on Mar. 10, 2005.

He heads the list of former leaders of the enclave facing charges of human rights violations, including torture and child abuse, and illegal possession of firearms. Gerhard Mucke, Karl Van den Berg, Kurt Schnellenkamp, and Hartmut Hopp were already under arrest as accomplices in cases of child sex abuse.

Also indicted was Albert Schreiber, who is in Germany and may be extradited to Chile.

The list of German nationals facing prosecution is completed by Schäfer's adopted daughter Rebeca, who lives in Argentina, and three former members of the colony who helped their leader hide from the law since 1997, until his arrest 13 months ago in a Buenos Aires suburb.

Along with other German immigrants, Schäfer, a Baptist preacher and former Nazi medic who fled Germany to escape child abuse charges, founded Colonia Dignidad as a tax-exempt charitable organisation on 170,000 hectares of land east of the town of Parral, some 340 km south of Santiago.

Reports that children were sexually abused in the sect first began to emerge in 1966 and reports on torture and forced disappearances of political dissidents began to appear in the 1970s. But they were ignored by the authorities.

The mantle of impunity enjoyed by the German colony was strengthened after Pinochet's Sept. 11, 1973

coup d'état, when Schäfer invited DINA to use the commune's installations to hide, torture, kill or "disappear" leftist political prisoners.

"Since the years of the dictatorship, we all knew about the repression in the German enclave carried out by DINA agents. Judge Zepeda's decision basically ratifies our denunciations," said Pizarro, who added that she did not know exactly how many dissidents were killed or forcibly disappeared in the commune.

"We understand that this information will come to light in the legal proceedings. The judge has been extremely cautious in terms of keeping information under wraps, since we have seen how Colonia Dignidad has evaded legal action in the past thanks to its broad support networks," said the activist.

Until 1997, Schäfer and his followers enjoyed total impunity, thanks to a powerful network of protection comprised of judges, right-wing opposition legislators, former officials of Pinochet's de facto regime, former military commanders, and members of the business community who reportedly benefited from Schäfer's services, according to socialist Senator Jaime Naranjo, human rights activists, and investigative journalists.

Pizarro did not rule out the possibility that as prosecuting Judge Zepeda's investigation moves forward, elements could emerge that implicate 90-year-old Pinochet as well. "There is no doubt that Pinochet was chiefly responsible for the repression. He was the direct superior to the head of DINA, and had breakfast every day with Contreras, to give him his orders," she said.

In January, the AFDD filed a lawsuit against DINA and Colonia Dignidad after police discovered an empty two-metre-deep common grave in the commune that had once held several victims of forced disappearance, in an investigation ordered by Zepeda. The remains were removed in 1978 on orders by the de facto regime.

The Ministry of the Interior and the State Defence Council are also plaintiffs in the case involving human rights abuses committed in Colonia Dignidad by DINA, which was dissolved in 1978 and replaced with the CNI intelligence agency.

Deputy Minister of the Interior Felipe Harboe said Monday that the government of President Michelle Bachelet - who took office last month - was satisfied with the judge's decision and the progress made in the investigation of the German enclave that until recently had been shrouded in secrecy.

It is significant that "those who committed horrors in that territory (Colonia Dignidad) are now facing prosecution. We hope the investigation will continue until they are finally convicted," said Harboe.

Zepeda's investigation made strides in the past few months, when files on some 40,000 people, including members of the colony, locals who studied at the agricultural school there, and political prisoners, were found in raids on Villa Baviera - Colonia Dignidad's official name.

Monday's indictment describes human rights crimes committed by DINA agents as well as German members of the colony.

Journalists Han Stange and Claudio Salinas told IPS that Judge Zepeda's decision to prosecute the former heads of DINA and the German enclave represented a major step forward, although of limited scope, since it only covers crimes committed between 1970 and 1990, leaving out offences that date back to the 1960s.

A book by Stange and Salinas was published in January, based on a painstaking investigation into the sect, titled "'Dr.' Schäfer's Friends: The Complicity Between the Chilean State and Colonia Dignidad".