

Stroessner's Death Closes Dark Chapter of History

By Raúl Pierre | August 23, 2006

A group of Paraguayan human rights activists and government officials had met Wednesday morning in Asunción to inaugurate a museum in what was once a torture centre of the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner. But suddenly the news arrived: The elderly former dictator was dead.

The coincidence was interpreted by human rights lawyer and former political prisoner Martín Almada as a sign of the end of an era and the start of another in which the coming generations would have the mission of clarifying what happened during the bloody reign of General Stroessner, who governed Paraguay with an iron fist from 1954 to 1989.

At the age of 93, and weighing just 45 kilos, Stroessner died Wednesday in exile in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil. He had spent several days in intensive care, with pneumonia, after a hernia operation.

"We were surprised when he died right on the day that we were opening the 'Museum of Memory, the Dictatorship and Democracy' in the place where the Dirección Nacional de Asuntos Técnicos, better known as 'la Técnica,' operated a clandestine torture centre starting in 1956, with support from the United States," Almada, winner of the Alternative Nobel Prize in 2002, told IPS.

U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961) "had sent Colonel Robert Thierry to 'la Técnica' to teach torture techniques," said the activist, who in 1992 discovered the "archives of terror"—a vast collection of secret documents shedding light on the fate of tens of thousands of Latin Americans who were kidnapped, tortured, and killed by the security forces of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

The leftists, trade unionists, and other activists or their family members were "disappeared" as part of a coordinated regional strategy known as Operation Condor, which emerged in the early 1970s in Chile. And the "archives of terror," uncovered in a police station in a suburb of Asunción, the Paraguayan capital, provided irrefutable proof of the existence of the secret regional plan.

"It is a very good thing that now people can find out the truth about what happened, because a lot of people passed through (the clandestine prisons run by) 'la Técnica' (an intelligence body)," said Almada. "Operation Condor claimed the lives of nearly 100,000 people in the region."

Almada was harassed by Stroessner's secret police after publishing a doctoral thesis that criticized the Paraguayan educational system. He was arrested and accused of "terrorism" and of having ties to Communist groups.

His wife died of a heart attack at the age of 33, after she received a telephone call in which the military played a recording of the screams of her husband as he was being tortured.

Almada left the country in 1977 and returned in 1989 to bring legal action against Stroessner.

The activist admitted that he was a bit frustrated at his failure to get the former dictator "to see the face of justice in Paraguay," but said the general would now be facing "divine justice."

In Paraguay the news of the general's death was received with a sense of hope that a sad chapter in history could now be closed. However, there was mourning among those who admire Stroessner, whose birthday is still commemorated in some parts of the capital.

The former dictator still has his followers in Paraguay. His grandson Alfredo "Goly" Stroessner hopes to capitalize on their nostalgia, to make a bid for the presidency in 2008 as the candidate of the governing Red Party (*Partido Colorado*).



Stroessner seized power in a coup d'état in May 1954, and then changed the constitution to allow him to stay in power for eight consecutive terms.

Human rights organizations blame his dictatorship, which was backed by the Red Party, for the deaths and forced disappearance of 900 people, the torture of thousands, and the exile of nearly one million, in a country of just six million.

The dictator used the Red Party as his personal propaganda tool. To appease the United States, he gave his regime a sheen of democracy, allowing other parties to run in "elections" in which he invariably garnered around 90% of the vote.

Contraband, drug trafficking, political clientelism, and corruption flourished during his regime. Almada estimates that the former dictator and his cronies accumulated a combined fortune of five billion dollars.

In the end, Stroessner was overthrown by a coup led by General Andrés Rodríguez—his son's father-in-law—with the backing of dissident members of the Red Party, who organized elections shortly afterwards.

But Almada warned that Stroessner's legacy will not be easy to eradicate in Paraguay.

The former dictator "corrupted the country and the Red Party, which was originally social democratic, but

suffered profound divisions when it was led to the extreme-right by Stroessner."

"He also prostituted the armed forces and sold the country. Even today there are many estates in the hands of military officers and politicians who supported him," the activist added.

Stroessner's family, the military and several Red Party senators have requested that the former dictator's body be returned to Paraguay and buried with state honors, but human rights groups are prepared to fight the idea.

"He is a criminal and an international fugitive from justice," said Almada. "He was facing prosecution in Paraguay, France, Chile, Argentina, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany."

The National Movement of Victims of the Dictatorship called for street demonstrations to be held if Stroessner's body is sent home.

But the decision is up to the government of President Nicanor Duarte.

*Raúl Pierrri writes on behalf of the Inter Press Service, where this article was originally published at:
<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=34367>*

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Recommended citation:

Raúl Pierrri, "Stroessner's Death Closes Dark Chapter of History," Americas Program (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, August 23, 2006).

Web location:

<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/3460>

Production Information:

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