

Did Kissinger stop assassination warnings?

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WASHINGTON — A newly declassified document has added to long-standing questions about whether Henry Kissinger, while secretary of state, halted a U.S. plan to curb a secret program of international assassinations by South American dictators.

The document, a set of instructions cabled from Kissinger to his top Latin American deputy, ended efforts by U.S. diplomats to warn the governments of Chile, Uruguay and Argentina against involvement in the covert plan, known as "Operation Condor," according to Peter Kornbluh, an analyst with the National Security Archive, a private research organization that uncovered the document and made it public Saturday.

In the cable, dated Sept. 16, 1976, Kissinger rejected a proposed warning to the government of Uruguay about Condor and ordered "no further action be taken on this matter" by the State Department.

Five days after Kissinger's message, Chilean exile Orlando Letelier and a colleague were killed in Washington in a car bombing later tied to Chilean secret police working through the Condor network.

"The document confirms that it's Kissinger's complete responsibility for having rescinded a cease-and-desist order to Condor killers," said Kornbluh, author of a 2004 book on the late Chilean leader Augusto Pinochet.

In a statement, Kissinger said Kornbluh "distorted" the meaning of the cable and said it was intended to disapprove a specific approach to the Uruguayan government, not to cancel the plan to issue warnings to other nations in the Condor network.

Former State Department officials who worked under Kissinger during that period now say the instructions interrupted the



AP PHOTO 1975

A document raises questions about the role that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, right, seen with President Gerald Ford, played in stopping warnings about "Operation Condor," U.S. effort to rein in Operation Condor not just with Uruguay but with other countries.

After being told of the existence of Condor by the CIA in mid-1976, Kissinger initially ordered U.S. ambassadors in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and other countries involved in the terror network to issue demarches, or formal diplomatic presentations, warning leaders that "Condor activities would undermine relations with the United States."

"The instructions were never rescinded," Kissinger said in his statement. But it has been known for many years that U.S. ambassadors to Chile and Uruguay balked at delivering the demarches.

stalling the effort to head off Condor. The envoy to Uruguay feared for his own safety, previously disclosed documents have shown, and U.S. officials were devising a new way to deliver the U.S. warning.

Kissinger said his cable was intended only to delay the delivery of the demarche to Uruguay because of "very special circumstances," and not to cancel warnings to other Condor countries, Kissinger apparently was referring to the Uruguayan ambassador's fears.

However, shortly after Kissinger's order that "no further action be taken," his top Latin America deputies moved to cancel U.S. warnings to other countries as well. On

Sept. 20, Harry Shlaudeman, assistant secretary of state for Inter-American affairs, told his deputy, William Luers, to inform U.S. ambassadors in countries involved in Condor not to convey Washington's concerns about the operation.

The Letelier slaying occurred the next day.

There is no evidence that Kissinger knew of the Letelier plot. But the delays in issuing the demarches meant Chile apparently received no high-level U.S. warning about Condor before the bombing.

Shlaudeman said he had no memory of the cable from Kissinger or of his own subsequent message to Luers rescinding the orders to make demarches about Condor. But he acknowledged that the two documents were strong evidence that he had acted on Kissinger's orders.

"I must have sent it because I got the cable from Henry," he said.

Luers acknowledged that the demarches "were not carried out in Chile, Uruguay and Argentina before Orlando Letelier's murder." He added he does not specifically remember Kissinger's order or the instructions to cancel the demarches.

At the time of his death, Letelier worked at the Institute for Policy Studies, a Washington think tank, and was a leading anti-Pinochet activist. An Institute colleague also died in the bombing.

Scholars say Kissinger was reluctant to pressure authoritarian governments in the region, which he saw as bulwarks against leftist movements.

"I think the document reinforces what we already know — that Kissinger wanted to downplay Condor," said Jaehmi Suri, a history professor at the University of Wisconsin. "His primary concern was to maintain good and ... productive relationships with Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. Condor was seen as an irritant."

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