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TDCS DB–315/02051–72

Chile

4 March 1972

Continuing Preparations by General Alfredo Canales for a Military Coup and Canales' Opinion That the Current Controversy Over Constitutional Interpretation Could Provide the Needed Pretext

Chile, Santiago. (6 March 1972)

[4½ lines not declassified]

Summary: On 4 March 1972 General Alfredo Canales Marquez, Director of Military Instruction, informed another senior Chilean Army officer of his contingency planning for a military coup to overthrow the Government of President Salvador Allende. Canales spoke in general terms of his plans and of the support he enjoys within the Army. He surmised that President Allende might try to exceed his constitutional authority by vetoing certain provisions of the Constitutional reform bill delineating the three areas of the Chilean economy, thus providing the military with the necessary pretext to oust him from power. Canales indicated that he is now thinking in terms of April or May 1972 as a tentative target date for the coup attempt. End summary.

1. (Field comment: [less than 1 line not declassified] TDCSDB–315/00374–72, from a source of unknown reliability with good access to certain senior military officers reported General Canales' contention that his coup movement within the military was ready to undertake action at any time, provided a valid reason could be found to justify intervention. This report confirms previous reporting on his plans and indications that he is continuing his efforts and widening his support.)

2. During a private conversation with a senior officer of the Chilean Army on 4 March, General Canales spoke in general terms of his preparations for an eventual military coup against the Popular Unity (U.P.) government. Canales made reference to the current controversy between President Allende and the political opposition over the three areas Constitutional reform bill and surmised that this issue could provide him and his associates with the pretext they needed to

implement their plans. (Headquarters comment: The constitutional amendment passed by the opposition-controlled Congress seeks to block further nationalization of private enterprise. The current heated controversy stems from Allende's threat to veto objectionable provisions and his contention that a two-thirds majority is necessary to override a Presidential veto, in contrast to the opposition's view that only a simple majority is necessary. Allende intends to put the question to the pro-government Constitutional Tribunal for solution, but the opposition insists this would be a violation of the Constitution since the proper course would be a national plebiscite. However, while this issue could result in a major political confrontation, there are some indications that both sides are seeking a compromise.)

3. Canales admitted that the wording of the Constitution was somewhat vague regarding Presidential veto powers and the percentage of the congressional vote needed to override a veto. However, he said that the great majority of army officers were of the opinion that Allende and the U.P. intended to violate the spirit of the Constitution in their quest to achieve political and economic control of the country. He added that he would not make a move until the Army High Command had an opportunity to take a position on any action by Allende that was deemed to exceed his authority. However, if the High Command decides to remain silent while the opposition political parties and most of the army officers agreed that Allende had acted unconstitutionally, Canales said he would have to give orders for a move to the many officers who had pledged to support him in a coup attempt.

4. Canales explained that if the Army failed to move after a Constitutional violation by the President, it could be the last opportunity to eradicate the Marxist threat in Chile. He described the danger of inaction as twofold: on the one-hand the Chilean people would lose all hope in the willingness of the Army to protect them against illegal government machinations. On the other hand the young officers of the Army would feel that Army prestige had been irreparably damaged and their morale and discipline would be adversely affected. (Headquarters comment: [less than 1 line not declassified] whose reliability has not been fully established reported recently in some detail on the distrust between the High Command and the lower ranking Army officers. See CS–311/01014–72.)

5. (Source comment: While it is clear that Canales has not yet commenced precise planning for his coup attempt, at least in terms of what officers will have which responsibility during a military takeover, it is nevertheless apparent that he is serious about laying the groundwork for such an eventuality and is thinking of late April or early May 1972 as a tentative target date. Further, Canales estimated that 80 per cent of the Armed Forces would support him in a coup against the government if the President violated the Constitution, and this is probably accurate. However, the Constitutional issue itself is so complex that it is impossible to predict at what moment or over what aspect of the issue the Army, or Canales, will decide that Allende has overstepped his bounds. Also, the President is fully aware of the threat which the military represents to him and will probably make every effort to avoid a clear violation of the Constitution.) (Headquarters comment: Regarding Canales' claim of 80 per cent support by the Armed Forces, it is noted that in the previous report on his plans mentioned in paragraph 1 above, Canales told the source of the report that he had the unconditional loyalty of about 80 middle-grade officers as the result of his two years at the War Academy, and also the loyalty of the faculty members who served with him.)

6. (Headquarters comment: [less than 1 line not declassified] whose reliability is not proved reported in February on the transfers of officers distrusted by the regime and in particular on the distrust of Canales. See TDCS–314/01037–72. Later, the source of this report said the Army Commander-in-Chief, General Carlos Prats, had tried to force Canales' retirement. See TDCS–314/01318–72.)

7. Field Dissem: Embassy (Ambassador only) at Santiago.