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Chile

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Appraisal of Situation. Prospects for a Military Coup in Chile in the Near Future

Chile, Santiago

This is a field appraisal. It presents the view of this agency’s senior officer on the scene. It is an interpretation based on previously reported information. Prepared primarily for internal agency use, it is disseminated in the belief that it may be useful to intelligence analysts in their own assessment of the situation.

Summary: Numerous reports have been received recently relating to plans for a military coup in the near future. While coup rumors are traditional in Chile around the 18 September holidays, the reports received thus far appear to accurately reflect plotting by General Alfredo Canales and elements of the private sector; the chances of military intervention in the near future are perhaps greater now than at any time since President Allende assumed office. If a military coup is attempted by Canales, it is judged that the attempt would have a fair to good chance to succeed, provided that the majority of key unit commanders responded to the coup move and the other services and Carabineros remained sympathetic even if uncommitted. President Allende and the government parties are aware of the threat of a military coup and are undertaking both political measures and defensive steps to handle the situation. While it is judged that the chances of some type of military coup attempt occurring in the near future may be good, Chileans have a demonstrated propensity for negotiating settlements and surpassing crisis situations. End summary.

1. The possibility of military intervention in Chile in the near future is greater now than at any time since President Allende came into power. Discontent among the general population, especially in Santiago, is high as a result of the deteriorating economic situation and conflicts between the government and the political opposition. Discontent within all three branches of the Armed Forces and the National Police, especially among the middle and lower grade officers, is high and appears to be increasing. Their discontent is fed by the same basic causes as that of the population as a whole. Elements of the private sector in Chile, which feels itself directly threatened by the policies of the Allende regime, and Patria y Libertad (P&L, a right wing extremist group) are attempting to exploit tensions and to create conflict in order to promote even more discontent. The goal of private sector elements and P&L is to help create the conditions for military intervention.

2. During the past few weeks a number of reports have been received from both military and civilian sources relating to a possible military coup attempt against President Allende and his government. The majority of the information thus far received has dealt with the coup plans of General Alfredo Canales, who has consistently claimed to have sufficient support among Army officers for the successful enactment of his plans. Most information in this regard points to the 18–19 September period (Chilean Independence holidays) as the projected timing, although one source, who is part of General Canales' plotting group, claims that the coup could come about at any time, either before or after the Independence holidays depending upon the circumstances.

3. Canales appears to have the support of a large number of Army unit commanders throughout the country, including most of the principal unit commanders in the Santiago area. Canales reportedly also has fairly rapid coordination and communications with the planning levels of the private sector which has provoked strikes and conflicts throughout the country in recent weeks. As of 12 September the private sector has no provocative actions planned over the independence day holidays but intends to resume such activities as soon as the festivities are over.

4. Recent information indicates that perhaps General Carlos Prats, Army Commander-in-Chief, may now be reconciled to the necessity for a military move against the government. If true, this would be a most significant development and would greatly increase the possibility of a coup, unless, of course, some dramatic change in the present correlation of political forces were to occur, or unless some equally dramatic change in the direction or composition of the government were to take place.

5. Three sources have now reported that Prats and Allende have had two serious disagreements recently, and two sources claim that Prats has adopted a more forceful attitude in defending the integrity of the Army vis-à-vis the government. This we believe is true. Prats is very concerned about Army unity, and is undoubtedly aware of the coup plans and preparations which are presently being made by General Canales. Thus, it is possible that Prats, who is aware that the majority of Army officers are opposed to the present government and, therefore, might be willing to follow Canales in a coup attempt, may be searching for a means to block Canales, preserve the unity of the Army, and still find a solution to the current political impasse.

6. Rumors of an impending coup are prevalent in Santiago at this time. President Allende and the government are aware of these rumors and it is very likely that they are knowledgeable of the efforts being made by Canales. Both Allende and leaders of the Communist Party of Chile (PCCh) have denounced what they called "a September plan of sedition" and the Party has alerted the workers and its self-defense mechanism to be prepared to take over Chilean industries. While the PCCh is concerned about the threat and is taking defensive actions, it believes that a coup attempt can be blocked. On 11 September the Department of Investigation (DI, Chilean Civil Police) was alerted by the government to a possible military coup attempt over the 18–19 September holidays. The DI contingent in Santiago has reportedly been strengthened with DI personnel from the provinces as a defensive measure.

7. In our view, Allende basically has two options open to him to defuse the situation. One is to undertake actions to appease the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) and the Armed Forces, and the other is to turn to the military as a government participant. A recent report claims that Allende has contacted a PDC leader, pointed out to him that a military coup would also be harmful to the PDC, and requested a six-month "truce" between the government and the PDC. The President told the PDC leader that while the opposition is growing in Chile, it is the rightist National Party, not the PDC, which is reaping the benefits of polarization. Allende also offered political concessions to the PDC in return for the "truce."

8. The PDC leadership is divided over the question of military intervention. While left-wing leaders of the party, such as Radomiro Tomic and Bernardo Leighton, would undoubtedly prefer to reach some accord with the Allende government,

there is evidence that supporters of former President Eduardo Frei are inclining more to the conclusion that the Allende regime must be terminated and that military intervention in some form is required. If a coup were to develop, the PDC would be more likely to favor a military move headed by the Army Commander-in-Chief, which would probably have the support of most of the Army Generals as well as the other services, rather than one led by Canales.

9. The second option open to Allende, which is much less likely, would be to invite the military to rule with him. He would grant whatever concessions might be necessary to accomplish this, such as the expulsion of some UP parties from the government and bring about a radical change in the political and economic direction of his administration. We believe that such a move would be attractive to those within the military who would like to change the present government, but who would prefer to accomplish this within the framework of constitutional legality.

10. As of this date, the chances are good for some kind of military attempt in the near future. If Canales attempts to lead his forces without the cooperation of the other officers of general rank, but with the support of the majority of Army officers and at least the sympathy of the other two services, the coup attempt would have a fair to good chance to succeed, especially if the other two services moved quickly to support Canales. If the coup movement were to be led by Prats and the Army High Command, it would probably signify that the Commanders-in-Chief of the other services and possibly the majority of the Carabineros were in agreement, and that the effort would be a coordinated one. Under this scenario, the coup attempt would have a very good prospect of success.

11. Notwithstanding recent reporting indicating that a military coup could occur in the near future, there are several factors that augur against a coup at this time. There is the propensity of Chilean political and military leaders for finding political means to defuse highly volatile crisis situations. President Allende has shown himself especially adroit in this type of political maneuvering, and he is apparently working to find a political solution to the present crisis. Last week’s high level of public disorder no longer exists. The government has closed the secondary schools in an effort to keep students from demonstrating, and the opposition has suspended its march scheduled for 14 September which could have acted as a spark to set off another round of violence. Additionally, the fact that the government is well aware influential officers within the military are plotting to overthrow the government eliminates the important element of surprise, which could be crucial to any successful coup attempt. Although a coup could occur, it would not be surprising for Chile to get through this crisis, especially considering the Chileans’ traditional aversion to violence and their proclivity for negotiating settlements to crisis situations.