

Judge on Pinochet kin trials steps down

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SANTIAGO, Chile --

The judge handling the embezzlement trials of relatives and aides of the late Gen. Augusto Pinochet submitted his resignation from the case on Monday after defense lawyers accused him of bias against the former dictator.

The Santiago Court of Appeals said in a communique it will soon decide whether to accept Judge Carlos Cerda's resignation from the case, which stems from the multi-million-dollar secret accounts owned by Pinochet at banks in the United States and elsewhere.

Cerda acted after Luis Pacull, a lawyer for Pinochet's youngest son, Marco Antonio, accused him of bias against the former dictator and his family.

Pacull said that Cerda had told reporters he believed Pinochet was guilty of illegally amassing his fortune abroad. Pinochet was under indictment when he died last year at age 91, but he was never convicted.

The Supreme Court twice reprimanded Cerda for his comments, but refused to remove him from the case.

Cerda, who was given the case more than a year ago, indicted and briefly arrested Pinochet's widow and five grown children, as well as 18 of his closest aides.

The Pinochet family has insisted that money found in his accounts abroad was legitimate and called the accusations against them politically motivated.

Most of the charges have since been dropped by the Supreme Court, which ruled Cerda failed to hold mandatory questioning of those he indicted. It also ruled that Pinochet's relatives cannot be charged with embezzling state funds because they were never government employees.

The Appeals Court said another judge would handle the case while it decides whether to restore Cerda.