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Wife of Marcos Is Called Suspect In Assassination

While world attention has been focused on the downing of Flight 007 and the fighting in Lebanon, someone has been getting away with murder in the Philippines.

Secret intelligence reports suggest cautiously that the assassination of Filipino dissident Benigno Aquino in Manila last month might have been ordered by First Lady Imelda Marcos, without her husband's knowledge.

Here's the background:

According to the intelligence reports, President Ferdinand Marcos has a serious kidney ailment that could cause him to relinquish the dictatorial power he has held for nearly 20 years. Aware of this, Aquino felt the time had come for him to leave his sanctuary in the United States and return to the Philippines.

It's no secret that Marcos would like to see his wife succeed him. Though he used to deny this, pointing out that she wasn't even a member of the Cabinet Executive Committee, he appointed her to that committee last year.

Marcos also sponsored the rise of

her closest military ally, Gen. Fabian Ver, who is now chief of staff of the Philippines armed forces, with 250,000 troops under his command. Ver also directs the Philippines intelligence services and presidential security.

Aquino made no secret of his hope to forestall a transfer of power to Imelda and the establishment of a Marcos dynasty. His return to the Philippines, therefore, was the greatest threat to Imelda's ambitions.

Sources with access to intelligence reports from the Philippines believe that Imelda and Ver may have arranged Aquino's assassination to eliminate their most charismatic rival. One responsible administration source discussed this possibility at length with my associate Dale Van Atta, who has also seen highly sensitive CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency reports on the subject.

As the man in charge of presidential security, Ver had been keeping track of Aquino throughout his exile in the United States. Ver and Imelda also stacked the Philippine Embassy in Washington, as a secret DIA report explained:

"The new [military] attache team was selected by Benjamin Romualdez, ambassador-designate and brother of First Lady Imelda Marcos, and confirmed by Armed Forces Chief of Staff Gen. Fabian Ver."

The DIA report continues: "The new team is also expected to monitor

Philippine dissident activity in the U.S. The attaches will undoubtedly report on, and possibly operate against, anti-Marcos Philippine activists in the U.S."

Their top target in this country was Aquino. The intelligence reports view Imelda Marcos' meetings with Aquino with some cynicism, particularly her warning to him last May that he might be assassinated if he returned to the Philippines.

"Mrs. Marcos can be expected to become one of many candidates to succeed her husband, and her maneuvering will add greatly to the political turmoil and instability that will follow his departure," a CIA profile noted, adding that "in the political confusion, she might succeed."

Imelda's biggest hurdle, the CIA figures, is the Philippine military brass, whose loyalty to her husband is personal and does not extend to her. That, presumably, is where Ver comes in.

Imelda, whom the CIA calls "the steel butterfly," has chosen her military allies well. Commanders of most military units in the Manila area—crucial to any seizure of power—are, like Ver, natives of Ilocos Norte province in northwestern Luzon. This is also Marcos' home turf.

The CIA's conclusion: "In a real power struggle . . . Ver and his proteges," along with Imelda, may well win.