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Chile: The Pinochet case -- Military must stay out of the judicial process

Amnesty International today urges President Ricardo Lagos to stand by his commitment recently made to the organization that his government would not interfere with the judicial proceedings involving Augusto Pinochet and would resist all military pressure.

The human rights organization calls on President Lagos to resist the strong military pressure which has been placed on him to consider that the order of Augusto Pinochet's house arrest may constitute a threat against national security.

Reacting to the news that the Chilean army-commander-in-chief has requested an immediate session of the National Security Council (created by Augusto Pinochet), Amnesty International stated that: "The attempts of the armed forces to make this judicial issue a matter of national security is simply unacceptable. It amounts to intolerable pressure upon Chile's judiciary."

The organization believes this request represents yet another example of the armed forces trying to protect their impunity.

"The armed forces are clearly continuing to seek protection for themselves from prosecution and to restrict the judicial investigation into human rights violations in Chile."

Amnesty International received personal assurances from President Lagos that he would not interfere in the judicial process when the organization's Secretary General, Pierre Sané, visited Chile in October 2000. In a meeting between the President and Pierre Sané, President Lagos gave the organization his agreement that there would be no political interference from any political actors in Chile throughout the judicial process involving Augusto Pinochet and others implicated in human rights violations.

Amnesty International is concerned at signs of political interference in the judicial process, including the level of pressure which has been placed upon Judge Guzmán. The supporters of Augusto Pinochet have demonstrated outside his home, and Judge Guzmán is on the record stating he has been put under "great pressure" on this case.

"We urge President Lagos to stand by his commitment to human rights and ensure the rights of the victims are guaranteed by the government keeping out of the judicial proceedings," Pierre Sané said.

Background

On 1 December 2000, Judge Juan Guzmán ordered that Augusto Pinochet be placed under house arrest for his role as the "intellectual author" of the "disappearances" during an October 1973 military operation known as the "Caravan of Death" ("Caravana de la Muerte"). This security force operation toured the country killing or "disappearing" scores of people linked to the political left.

Yesterday, the Santiago appeals court suspended the order pending a full hearing of the habeas corpus submitted by Augusto Pinochet's lawyers against the arrest warrant.

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