

AI INDEX: AMR 22/21/99

EMBARGOED UNTIL 11 SEPTEMBER 1999

Chile: 26 years of injustice and impunity must end

On the anniversary of the military coup that brought General Augusto Pinochet to power on 11 September 1973, the widespread and systematic human rights violations committed during that period still remain unresolved, Amnesty International said today.

"The arrest of Augusto Pinochet in London last year, brought new hope to the survivors and relatives of victims of human rights violations in their long struggle for truth and justice, but there is still a long way to go before they achieve their demands for truth and justice," Amnesty International said.

"This anniversary should be a reminder to the authorities of the duty of the Chilean State to bring to justice and punish those responsible for human rights violations and to establish the full truth. The executive must fully cooperate towards that goal."

"Basic principles of full truth and justice are essential for true reconciliation," the organization stressed. "History has shown that the wounds of the past can only be healed by truth and recognition of the atrocities committed. Only then can Chilean society look forward to a stable future."

Twenty-six years after the military coup, Chilean society remains divided over the legacy of the human rights violations committed during the military government. Those responsible for committing human rights violations played a pivotal role in dictating the terms of transition to civilian rule and the mechanisms guaranteeing impunity which still remain in place.

On this 26th anniversary, Amnesty International reiterates its call to the Chilean authorities to remove the obstacles which have obstructed effective judicial investigations into the whereabouts of the "disappeared", to clarify the facts about past human rights violations, to identify the perpetrators and to bring them to justice.

"The Chilean authorities have a duty to ensure that Augusto Pinochet's responsibility in these violations is clearly established by a court of law," Amnesty International stressed. "The need for a firm pledge to effectively resolve the iniquities of the past is more pressing than ever."

Amnesty International takes note of the human rights dialogue currently taking place in Chile ("Mesa de Diálogo"*) to discuss the legacy of past human rights violations. Nevertheless, the organization stresses that half-hearted measures resulting in anything less than complete justice and truth would be too little too late and would be a further insult to the victims and their relatives.

Background

On 11 September 1973, the Chilean military violently overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende, heralding the implementation of a policy of systematic human rights violations under the direct command of General Augusto Pinochet. To consolidate power, the military commanders implemented a planned systematic, widespread policy of human rights violations. Thousands were detained, tortured, executed and disappeared.

The nature of these human rights violations has been officially recognized by the civilian government of Chile in its report to the UN Committee against Torture in 1990. The combined findings of the Reparation and Reconciliation Corporation, which was set up under the administration of President Patricio Aylwin in 1992, and the subsequent Truth and Reconciliation Commission, recorded 1,102 "disappearances" and 2,095 extrajudicial executions and deaths resulting from torture, making a total of 3,197 victims that were officially recognized by the Chilean state. However, those victims of torture who survived their ordeal were not included in the records of the commissions.

For over a quarter of a century relatives of the victims of human rights violations have campaigned for justice, as well as truth, with the support of human rights lawyers, organizations and judges. Several measures which were approved by the military government of General Augusto Pinochet prior to the transition to civilian rule, chiefly the Amnesty Law of 1978, have made it impossible for the relatives to find answers to the whereabouts of the "disappeared" and to obtain justice.

* The Minister of Defence has recently convened a "Mesa de Diálogo" (human rights discussions table), inviting human rights groups, lawyers and heads of the armed forces. This initiative has been strongly criticized by some human rights groups, including relatives of the "disappeared" who are sceptical of its outcome.

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