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Chile: Military Officer Arrested For Involvement In Telephone Tapping Scandal

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On Nov. 10, Army auditor general Gen. Fernando Torres told reporters that Capt. Fernando Diez Vidal had been arrested and was being held incommunicado at an army installation following his confession of involvement in a telephone espionage case. The scandal followed release of a taped telephone conversation between Sen. Sebastian Pinera and a journalist in which Pinera spoke of his political rival, Deputy Evelyn Matthei in deprecatory terms. As a result of the scandal, both Pinera and Matthei have removed themselves from the elections for the National Renovation (Renovacion Nacional, RN) party presidential candidacy. According to deputy chief of the Army Gen. Jorge Lucar, Diez Vidal taped the conversation and gave the tape to Matthei. Lucar denied that the Army is involved in intercepting private conversations. An official Army communique released the same day stated that Diez Vidal acted on his own initiative in taping the conversation. It stated that the military institution is not connected with the case and warned that the Army will not accept attempts to involve the institution in personal behavior corresponding to one of its members. The communique indicated that Diez Vidal, who belonged to a telecommunications battalion, will be tried by the Second Military Tribunal for his role in the telephone espionage case. The communique provoked a wave of criticism from various political parties and newspapers, many of which called for an independent investigation into the events and a civilian trial for Diez Vidal to explore the role of military intelligence in the taping of private civilian conversations. On Nov. 14, Deputy Jorge Schaulsohn of the Party for Democracy (Partido por la Democracia, PPD), told reporters at least three Army colonels are involved in the telephone espionage scandal. Schaulsohn said the Army's explanation was "inadequate," and said that, in the past, when the institution has been involved in problems or scandals such as in the sale of arms to Croatia it hasn't taken responsibility and has consistently attributed the actions to personal initiative by individuals. In a Nov. 16 meeting, Defense Minister Patricio Rojas and Army chief Gen. Augusto Pinochet agreed to a request from President Patricio Aylwin for the Army to conduct a more thorough investigation into the telephone espionage scandal. Minister Secretary-General of Government Enrique Correa told reporters the President's office has information indicating that Diez did not act alone. Correa added that revealing the truth doesn't weaken the military institution, but rather "it becomes stronger when it is able to clarify criminal acts because it gains credibility and the respect of the people." [Sources: Agence France-Presse, 11/09/92, 11/11/92; Spanish news service EFE, 11/09/92, 11/10/92, 11/13/92, 11/14/92; El Mercurio (Chile), La Nacion (Chile), 11/11/92, 11/13/92, 11/14/92, 11/17/92]