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LADB Staff

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Chilean President Frei Names Successor to Retiring Gen. Augusto Pinochet

by LADB Staff

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On Oct. 30, Chilean President Eduardo Frei named Gen. Ricardo Izurieta as commander in chief of the army to succeed former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), who will step down in March 1998. Pinochet remained head of the army after the country began the transition to democracy in 1990. The announcement was made by Defense Minister Edmundo Perez Yoma, who said Izurieta will take over on March 10, 1998, the day before the 81-year-old Pinochet takes his seat as senator-for-life in the Chilean Congress (see NotiSur, 04/04/97 and 10/03/97). Frei had said earlier he would not name Pinochet's successor until March.

"Having completed the regular process of the army's merit evaluation, the president has decided to exercise his constitutional right to appoint Maj. Gen. Ricardo Izurieta as commander in chief, effective March 10," Perez said.

The 54-year-old Izurieta, a former military attache to the US and Israel, has most recently been serving as army chief of staff. Izurieta played no political role during the 17-year dictatorship, nor has his name been linked to the massive human rights violations that occurred. He is widely regarded as both professional and nonpolitical. Information in the Chilean press following the announcement indicated much of the military brass expected the position to be filled by Pinochet's second in command, Gen. Guillermo Garin. However, this would have required that the government postpone his retirement, scheduled for Nov. 30.

Frei chose instead to allow Garin's retirement to stand, moving farther down the seniority list to name Izurieta. The announcement met with general approval both within the governing Concertacion coalition and from the right-wing opposition. Sen. Sergio Bitar, head of the Partido por la Democracia (PPD), said the absence of charges of human rights violations against Izurieta makes possible "a new stage" in civilian- military relations in Chile. Members of the opposition expressed support for the nomination and for the "normality" with which the government was handling the succession process.

Viviana Diaz, vice president of the Association of Families of Detained and Disappeared, said she hoped that "Izurieta will return the professional and institutional character to the army, from which it should never have deviated." Pinochet's retirement may bring political shift Izurieta's promotion will mean significant changes within the military, with 12 of the army's 45 generals scheduled to retire in the next five months. Nevertheless, any sign of a change in the military's position regarding issues such as human rights abuses is still unclear and even contradictory.

Political analysts say Pinochet's departure will almost certainly reduce the military's political and social influence, even with his presence in Congress. Pinochet has made it clear that he intends to use his Senate seat to "defend the military." However, his intention to enter the Senate has angered

many Chileans. "That the man responsible for the longest dictatorship in the history of Chile should enter Congress without an election is an offense to Chilean democracy," said Sen. Jaime Gazmuri of the Partido Socialista. With Pinochet more in the background, Frei stands a better chance of finding enough political support to eliminate nonelected senators, including the four seats that are currently reserved for the military, and to replace the generals who retain half the seats on the National Security Council. A recent bill to eliminate the nonelected positions was voted down. The Frei government has already managed to place tighter financial control on the military, which receives 10% of the revenues of the national copper-mining company. In a recent change of policy, all military expenditures must now be approved by the civilian-controlled Defense Ministry.

Human rights abuses during dictatorship still an issue

Meanwhile, a trial is underway in Spain charging Pinochet and his military junta with crimes against humanity stemming from the disappearance of at least ten Spanish citizens at the hands of the military regime. Pinochet has dismissed the charges and recently lashed out at the Spanish courts. "That trial is absolutely absurd and unfair," Pinochet said. "We should ask those Spanish judges why they never tried Cuban President Fidel Castro or many others behind the iron curtain. Curiously, it is only against me. I pay no attention."

In a related matter, human rights activists were angered by the recent announcement that Jaime Lepe, a member of Pinochet's notorious secret police DINA during the 1970s, would be promoted to the rank of brigadier general. Lepe, who later became general secretary of the army, was part of a special DINA brigade that kidnapped Carmelo Soria, a Spaniard working in Chile with the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and tortured him to death in June 1976. Lepe was exonerated by the 1978 amnesty law.

Carmen Soria, the murdered diplomat's daughter, staged a solitary demonstration outside La Moneda government palace to protest Lepe's promotion. On Nov. 4, the government announced that Frei was vetoing Lepe's promotion. "President Frei has decided not to accept the recommendation to promote Lepe to brigadier general because he does not meet one of the criteria that guides the presidential privilege," said Defense Minister Edmundo Perez Yoma.

The criteria states that "the person shall not be involved in public and well-known situations that negatively affect the person's image before the country or important sections of its population, as well as the harmonious relations that should exist between the citizens and the armed forces." [Sources: The New York Times, 10/07/97; Associated Press, 10/30/97; Inter Press Service, 10/30/97, 10/31/97; The Miami Herald, 11/03/97; Reuter, 10/30/97, 10/31/97, 11/04/97; Spanish news service EFE, 11/04/97; Clarin (Argentina), 11/04/97, 11/05/97]

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