

5-28-1999

Chilean President Frei Delivers Final Annual Report Amid Violent Protests

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Chilean President Frei Delivers Final Annual Report Amid Violent Protests." (1999). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/12645>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Chilean President Frei Delivers Final Annual Report Amid Violent Protests

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Chile

Published: 1999-05-28

Chilean President Eduardo Frei offered his final State of the Nation report May 21 amid protests by supporters of former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). The opposition lawmakers disrupted the session in Congress and then walked out to protest the presence of British and Spanish diplomats.

Outside, protests continued by port workers and students. The weeks of protests left one student mortally wounded, several injured, and hundreds detained. Frei enters his last year in office facing serious social problems including the protests by students and port workers, political fallout from the lengthy extradition process in Britain against Pinochet, confrontations with Mapuche Indians, and increased unemployment caused by the economic crisis.

Unemployment has reached 8.2% and nearly 500,000 workers are without jobs. Government officials have said they expect unemployment to increase in the coming months because of the economic recession. For the first time since Frei took office, his approval rating has dropped below 50%.

Frei's problems are as much political as social and economic, however. Along with the prolonged economic belt-tightening and electricity rationing caused by a severe drought, Frei must also contend with anger from the right at the government's handling of Pinochet's arrest and dissension within the governing Concertacion coalition as it prepares for party primaries on May 30 to choose its presidential candidate.

Opponents cause scene in Congress

As Frei arrived at Congress in Valparaiso to give his address, altercations broke out between Pinochet supporters and opponents in the legislature. Pro-Pinochet legislators unfurled a banner in view of the Spanish and British diplomats demanding Pinochet's release and handed the ambassadors a letter, then walked out of the session in protest.

Pablo Longueira, president of the ultraconservative Union Demócrata Independiente (UDI), who led the protest, said that "a nation that wants freedom, sovereignty, and dignity must not allow people such as these to come to a ceremony that, for Chileans, is part of their republican tradition."

When Frei began to speak, people in the galleries began shouting, "Viva Pinochet!" Senate President Andres Zaldivar, presidential candidate in the Concertacion primary for Frei's Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), angrily called for order and sent police to remove the protesters. Nine people were arrested for disturbing the peace, including throwing coins and leaflets at the Spanish and British ambassadors. "Today we will appear on television around the world giving a sad example of what is happening in our Congress," Frei said.

Frei's speech praised the government's efforts to lower unemployment, reduce inflation, wipe out poverty, build low-cost housing, improve health care, and reform the educational and judicial systems. He said he expects Chile's economy, hit by depressed copper prices and financial turmoil in other markets, to recover in the second half of the year. Frei reaffirmed his commitment to rid the country of "authoritarian enclaves" inherited from the dictatorship. He said in the second half of this year he will send Congress a bill to convoke a plebescite regarding constitutional reforms to strengthen the "imperfect" Chilean democracy.

"Let the people settle the conflict of powers," said Frei. "To those who speak of the concerns of the people, I ask them to show that they are not afraid of the people. Let's be very clear: nine years after the return to democracy, Chileans have not achieved the full, legitimate, true acceptance of an integrally democratic Constitution."

Since Chile returned to democracy in 1990, the Concertacion has tried three times to reform the 1980 Constitution approved during the Pinochet regime. Among the proposed reforms was to abolish the nine designated senatorial seats awarded to various institutions. These positions, half of which are held by former military officers, have guaranteed the conservative opposition control of the Senate despite the majority vote received by the Concertacion in all national elections since 1989. "How long will the country go on maintaining an open economy alongside a limited democracy?" asked Frei.

Frei said that Pinochet's detention in London "seriously damages Chile's image in the international community and brings uncertainty to the national political transformation." "It is more beneficial for the country for Sen. Pinochet to return to Chile during my term," said Frei, adding that "the government will continue using political, judicial, and humanitarian means" to achieve the general's return.

Frei said Chile supported the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal. "My government has been part of the growing universal awareness of human rights; we fully share the idea that crimes that affect all humanity, and that do not recognize territorial borders, must be judged by a tribunal, also without borders, ratified by the states." But until this tribunal is functioning, the jurisdiction continues to belong to each nation. "Globalization cannot become a pretext for the strongest states to arbitrarily subordinate those that have less power."

On May 24, all parties on the right made it clear that they will not support a plebescite on constitutional reforms. Legislators from the Renovacion Nacional (RN), the UDI, and the designated senators said the effort was doomed to failure. "It does not seem democratic that, after the government has failed to do something three times, it now wants to bypass the National Congress to make a change that only it wants," said former Senate president Sergio Romero of the RN.

Port workers, students protest during speech

The day of Frei's address, about 1,000 port workers, backed by members of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), and students clashed with the militarized police (carabineros) in streets leading to Congress. Police prevented demonstrators from getting near the Congress, but protesters stoned police, burned a wooden bench, and kicked over a police motorcycle. Police used tear gas and water

cannons to disperse the demonstrators, and about 200 people were arrested. Port workers were protesting privatization of the ports, and university students were demanding an increase in the university budget.

The protests by university students have been going on for several weeks as students demand more funds for scholarships and for bank credits to finance their studies. The students were also reacting to the death of student Daniel Menco in a demonstration earlier in the week in Arica, 2,050 km north of Santiago. An autopsy revealed the student died as a result of a bullet wound. The Fiscalia Militar in Arica arrested carabinero Major Norman Vargas, accused of firing the fatal bullet. On May 24, the government and the University of Tarapaca requested that the Corte Suprema appoint a civilian judge to investigate Menco's death. Normally, military courts would have jurisdiction in such a case.

Mapuches stage violent protest

While port workers and students demonstrated in the cities, Mapuche Indians have taken over private haciendas and set up roadblocks in the countryside. This year, groups of Indians, driven by the lack of land and by poverty, have staged several "recoveries" of lands that once belonged to them. On May 24, one Mapuche and five police were wounded in a confrontation in southern Chile over logging on Mapuche land. Nineteen Indians were arrested.

The majority of the Indian communities oppose the construction of the Ralco hydroelectric plant on the Bio Bio River as well as increased logging concessions granted to foreign lumber companies (see NotiSur, 1998-03-06). Frei said his administration had returned more than 170,000 hectares of land to indigenous families and communities. He warned forestry companies that they must be more sensitive to indigenous demands, but he also admonished Mapuche leaders to keep their protests within legal bounds. [Sources: Reuters, 05/19/99, 05/21/99; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 05/18/99, 05/22/99; CNN, 05/20/99, 05/21/99, 05/22/99; Notimex, 05/17/99, 05/19/99, 05/21-23/99; CHIP News (Chile), 05/24/99, 05/25/99; El Mercurio (Chile), 05/25/99; Spanish news service EFE, 05/15-17/99, 05/20-22/99, 05/24/99, 05/26/99]

-- End --