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Chile Marks Thirtieth Anniversary of 1973 Coup

by LADB Staff

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As in the US, Sept. 11 will never be just another day in Chile. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 1973, military coup that overthrew democratically elected President Salvador Allende (1970-1973) and initiated the repressive 17-year dictatorship headed by Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). Thirty years later, Chile is still trying to come to terms with those events and complete the transition to democracy.

On Aug. 23, 1973, Allende accepted the resignation of constitutionalist Gen. Carlos Prats as army chief and named the second in the chain of command, Pinochet, to the post. Three weeks later, Pinochet seized power in a US-encouraged military coup in which Allende died. Pinochet remained de facto president until March 11, 1990, and commander in chief of the armed forces until March 10, 1998.

Some Chileans say the coup was justified because Pinochet saved the country from chaos and communism, while others consider the coup and its consequences the darkest page in Chilean history. In an interview with Pagina 12 on a visit to Buenos Aires, Lagos said Chileans will never agree on the causes of the coup and said there "is no official history." He said, "In the discussion of the past, some want to put the emphasis on the causes and others on the consequences. It seems to me that both elements are legitimate."

Tribute to Allende in Chilean Congress

On Sept. 3, the Chilean Congress paid homage to Allende for the first time since the coup. The tribute was led by Allende's daughter Isabel who is president of the Camara de Diputados. Representatives of all parties in the governing Concertacion coalition attended, but those in the right-wing opposition Alianza por Chile the Union Democrata Independiente (UDI) and the Renovacion Nacional (RN) did not.

Fidel Espinoza, leader of the Partido Socialista (PS) deputies, refuted the Alianza's contention that the homage tried to legitimize Allende's Unidad Popular (UP) government. "We do not need the blessing, the OK, nor the permission of anyone to speak today, 30 years after the end of that government," said Espinoza, son of an executed politician. He said Allende "was not an infallible leader, but he was one of the most notable political figures in Chile with a deep democratic spirit." "We Socialists want democracy, no one can doubt that," said Espinoza. "What we do not want is that the image of La Moneda in flames, as an icon of political intolerance, ever be repeated."

But Deputy Jaime Mulet, secretary general of the Democracia Cristiana (DC), part of the Concertacion, told reporters that "it is difficult to disassociate the figure of Allende from his government." He added, "Sept. 11 not only divides Chileans in general, but also the Concertacion."

In other events marking the anniversary, on Sept. 10, the president placed a commemorative plaque in the area of the Palacio de La Moneda where Allende took his life during the coup.

In another ceremony on Sept. 11, Lagos reopened the door of La Moneda at Calle Morande 80. That was the door through which Allende's body was taken, which Pinochet had sealed after the coup. The door now leads to a room named for the late president.

One noticeable difference in Chile this year is the media coverage. As never before, Chilean television and the press have examined the events that led to the coup. The media have stopped using terms like the "alleged detained-disappeared" or "supposed torture victims," and the right's claim that the dictatorship's human rights violations were an invention of "international communism" is no longer given credence.

Television reporter Santiago Pavlovic said, "We have to remember that more than 60% of the population of Chile is under 30. That means they did not experience the coup, and perhaps this excessive coverage is compensating for everything that was not talked about or explained during 17 years of military government, when only one voice was heard."

This year's commemoration also brought musicians and artists from around the world, including Brazil's Minister of Culture Gilberto Gil and Cuban artist Silvio Rodriguez. They will be present on Sept. 12, when President Lagos renames the Estadio Chile the Estadio Victor Jara, for the musician who was tortured and murdered in the stadium by the military in the days following the coup.

Human rights proposals by Lagos

The anniversary has renewed efforts to resolve the lingering human rights issues. In mid-August President Lagos unveiled a new proposal. He said it would never be possible to reach a definitive solution for the roughly 3,000 cases of forced disappearance and politically motivated murders committed during the Pinochet regime.

Lagos said the aim should be "a point of maximum agreement, maximum truth, maximum justice, maximum reparations." He said his proposal was "one more step in this long process in which Chile responds to those who were victims." To encourage people to provide information that could shed light on the fate of the disappeared, the president proposed leniency for soldiers who "acted under the fear of reprisals that threatened their lives, or in a state of insurmountable ignorance that practically annulled their decision-making ability."

But "those who organized and planned the repression, gave the orders, directed the execution of the crimes or directly carried them out, in full understanding and awareness," would not be eligible for lighter sentences. The president also recommended that financial reparations to the families of people who were disappeared or killed be increased by around 50%, and extended to more people.

In addition, the plan would make "symbolic" compensation available to torture victims. But the families of members of the military who were killed in clashes with leftist guerrillas will also become eligible for reparations, an aspect of the plan that angers human rights activists.

Another aim of the plan is to make it possible for Chile to ratify the Rome Statute, the treaty that created the International Criminal Court (ICC), and to ratify the Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance. Lagos' plan was partly the result of an initiative sponsored by the right-wing UDI, possibly to improve its image before the next presidential elections. The turnabout by the UDI paved the way for input from other parties and from associations that represent relatives of victims and survivors.

Lagos invited human rights groups, political parties, and religious leaders to offer suggestions. "Since the return of democracy in 1990, there have been three big pushes" to resolve the human rights issue, one by each administration that has taken power, said Jose Zalaquett, human rights lawyer and co-director of the Centro de Derechos Humanos at the Universidad de Chile. The Lagos administration has taken the most extensive action. For example, judges appointed exclusively to investigate human rights cases have opened proceedings against more than 300 military officers, including 22 generals, accused of abuses during the Pinochet years. "To a large extent, judges are ignoring the amnesty law for the purposes of investigation," Zalaquett said, and no court has applied the amnesty law since Lagos took office three years ago.

Lagos's human rights proposal, which is expected to be submitted to Congress next month, has divided human rights organizations and victims' groups. The relatives' group and some leftist parties have denounced the plan as a means for "expanding impunity," but other organizations regard it as offering the best prospects for forcing the guilty to account for their actions.

On Aug. 20, leaders of the Agrupacion de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (AFDD) expressed their objections and asked for a meeting with Lagos. "The government proposal signifies impunity for the assassins and puts the victims on the same level as the victimizers," said AFDD president Lorena Pizarro.

"There is a difference between impunity and immunity, and so long as this proposal maintains that distinction, it constitutes an advance," said Pamela Pereira, a lawyer for some of the victims. "The courts are where responsibility for human rights abuses should be established, and this plan adheres to that logic."

At a news conference this week, Lagos said Chileans must recognize that there are limits to what a government can do. The plan is "a step forward," he said, but "this chapter can never be closed."

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