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Chile Debates Sweeping Changes to Military

by LADB Staff
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In response to the death of 44 young soldiers and one sergeant on a march in the mountains south of Santiago, candidates in Chile's presidential election along with members of Congress have called for an end to conscription into the military. A surprise winter blizzard stranded almost 500 soldiers on a march in the foothills of Volcan Antuco, leading to the death of 45.

The head of the military, Gen. Juan Emilio Cheyre, removed a number of top commanders and pointed out "command failures" leading up to and following the march, though President Ricardo Lagos resisted calls to have Cheyre resign. Family members now intend to sue the military for mistakes that led to the death of their children, while government prosecutors are investigating commanders.

Worst peacetime military loss in eight decades

The 474 conscripts of the 17th Regiment of Los Angeles started out on a 28-km march along the side of the Antuco volcano on May 18, walking between mountain refuges that stood at altitudes of 1,400 and 1,700 meters. A storm struck five hours into the march and winds gusted at up to 80 km an hour, with the wind-chill factor dropping to 2 degrees Fahrenheit. Of those on the march, 45, most of them teenagers, died of hypothermia or exposure in the mountains.

Rescue teams managed to remove the remaining 429 marchers from the area and treated them for various symptoms resulting from the cold. As of June 5, the military had recovered the frozen bodies of 41 soldiers and assumed that the other four were dead. More than 100 conscripts ended their service after the incident, with 326 returning to their fort in the city of Los Angeles, 700 km south of Santiago. The troops, mostly ages 18 and 19, had just begun their mandatory military service less than three months earlier. Witnesses to the storm described a "white wind" of swirling, frozen snow that blinded, stung, and completely disoriented the marchers.

Rescuers said that, within one or two steps, hikers on the mountain could find themselves up to their waists in snow. Authorities described the storm as a "snow tsunami," the worst in the region in three decades. The loss of troops was the military's worst peacetime military disaster since 1927, when 12 military academy cadets died and scores were wounded in a train crash.

"Command failures" led to deaths

Reports stated that officers in charge of the regiment ignored warnings of severe weather and that the young men were sent out on the training exercises with light clothing completely inadequate for the cold weather conditions and snow.
Chile's meteorological service had issued a storm warning, yet only one of the five companies that set off was wearing mountain survival gear. Some political figures called for the removal of Gen. Cheyre after the incident, but President Lagos of the Concertacion ruling coalition rejected those calls.

On May 24, Defense Minister Jaime Ravinet said, "We believe that these doubts about Gen. Cheyre are absurd. On the contrary, he has demonstrated great integrity and fortitude and a capacity to sacrifice himself for his people. You have seen him go five days practically without sleeping up there in the Andes, visiting Los Angeles, talking to the families. He has the government's complete support." Cheyre removed the top officers of the Los Angeles regiment Col. Roberto Mercado, Lt. Col. Luis Pineda, and Maj. Patricio Cereceda from their posts. There were also reports that Cheyre was considering removing Gen. Rodolfo Gonzalez, head of the Third Army Division, from his post.

An internal Army investigation will determine the responsibility of Gen. Gonzalez and the other officers, with the possibility that they could face prison sentences of up to 10 years. The officers face charges of manslaughter, mistreatment of subordinates, and failure to fulfill military duties, military prosecutor Col. Sergio Cea said. Survivors alleged that Maj. Cereceda ordered the men to march while he stayed back at a military mountain shelter.

One soldier, Felix Fonseca, said that some sergeants and corporals tried to convince Cereceda to cancel the order. Cheyre announced that the victims' families would be paid US$5,400 in life insurance and US$4,900 in reparations, and that they would have the right to a monthly pension of about US$260. The Congress is also looking into indemnification packages for the families of the dead troops.

**Conscription opponents in Congress, presidential race**

After the tragedy dominated headlines, prominent political figures called for changes in Chile's Servicio Militar Obligatorio (SMO). Calls for the abolition of the draft gained increasing strength after the incident.

"We need a serious study of the structure of our military service, of the training regime, and the instruction given to officers who teach our recruits," said Antonio Leal, a congressional deputy and member of the Partido Socialista (SP), part of the Concertacion ruling coalition. The right-wing Union Democratica Independiente (UDI) called for a "100% volunteer army." Two years of military service is now obligatory for all men at the age of 18, although there are many exemptions. The current government has discarded the idea that there will be changes to the obligatory military service in Chile, though the incoming president in 2006 may have a different view.
Defense Minister Jaime Ravinet described the dead as "volunteers" and therefore claimed that the tragedy had no bearing on SMO. Ravinet told reporters that 86% of the youth coming into the military are volunteers, meaning that the SMO needed no changes. "In the case of Antuco, they were all volunteers," he said, "which does not diminish the tragedy at all...But to discuss the issue of SMO because of the incident is not appropriate."

Activists and many politicians, however, saw the incident differently. "The Antuco tragedy has awakened a widespread sentiment in the country in favor of putting an end to compulsory military service," theologian Alvaro Ramis said. Ramis is an activist with the Red Chilena de Objection de Consciencia, an umbrella organization of about a dozen religious, youth, and human rights groups advocating voluntary military service.

The nongovernmental Corporacion de Promocion y Defensa de los Derechos del Pueblo (CODEPDU) has called for a reconsideration of compulsory military service. The group also argued that the civil justice system, and not only the military courts, should investigate the tragedy in Antuco, as well as the deaths of other recruits in recent years in Chile. Senator Sergio Paez of the Partido Democrata Cristiano (PDC) said that, in practice, 87% of recruits in Chile sign up voluntarily, because priority is given to those who specifically express an interest in military service when they register with the armed forces.

But organizations of conscientious objectors complain that all men over 18, including those who have not done military service, join the ranks of the military reserves and can be called up in case of armed conflict, even if they are pacifists. It is mainly young people from lower-income families who end up doing military service in Chile, since only 20,000 (including 1,000 women) recruits a year are needed, although some 120,000 Chileans turn 18 every year.

Similar proportions of the population do military service in other Latin American countries, like Brazil, where only 10% of the 3.2 million potential recruits are actually conscripted. The UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) says that the only countries in Latin America where military service is not obligatory are Argentina, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, and Uruguay. Conscription has also been voluntary in practice in El Salvador since the end of the civil war, in 1992.

In the past, there have been frequent accusations of mistreatment of Chilean draftees by drill instructors, especially during the 1973-1990 dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (see NotiSur, 1997-06-13). Since April, two draftees have died of bullet wounds and one drowned while in training. The cases are still being investigated. Compulsory military service in Chile "has a long history of violence," said Ramis. "There have been many cases of unclarified deaths. Obligatory conscription provides no solution for Chile's youth and is not in keeping with a democratic society."

Attending services for some of the dead conscripts were four presidential candidates jockeying for the vote in December presidential elections: Michelle Bachelet of the PS and Soledad Alvear of the PDC, the two leading presidential hopefuls from the Concertacion, and Joaquin Lavin and Sebastian Pinera, possible candidates for the right-wing Alianza por Chile. Both Alvear and Pinera said progress must be made toward making conscription voluntary.
Former foreign minister Alvear said that, if she were elected president, compulsory military service would be abolished by 2007 and women's participation in the military would be expanded, in response to the level of interest that women have expressed. She also said military pay and benefits would be improved. Alvear has since dropped out of the race, however, after her campaign showed little chance of winning primary elections against Bachelet. After several months of campaigning and a televised debate with Bachelet, Alvear's poll numbers remained low.

After Pinera of the Renovacion Nacional (RN) entered the race to be chosen the Alianza candidate against Joaquin Lavin of the UDI, Alvear closed ranks with Bachelet, making the former defense minister the Concertacion's sole candidate and likely victor in December's vote. Lavin had been polling far behind both Bachelet and Alvear, but Pinera's entrance into the RN primary race shook up the electoral scene. Pinera will have to wage a strong campaign to overtake Bachelet's current lead.

**Chile arms purchases continue at expensive rate**

Although the Antuco tragedy may have long-term implications for recruitment and conscription into Chile's armed forces, the continent's largest national military continued its pattern of large arms purchases. In May, the government announced plans to buy about US$500 million in ships, tanks, and planes.

Defense Minister Ravinet, along with the commanders of the three branches of the military, discussed purchasing plans to replace equipment they considered obsolete with President Lagos at the end of May. Ravinet said the plans were for long-term acquisitions and would extend until 2014. Chile's military receives 10% of the revenue that the government obtains from the state-run Corporacion Nacional del Cobre (CODELCO), copper exports being the country's most-lucrative sector.

The 1980 Constitution drafted under the Pinochet dictatorship mandated the Ley Reservada del Cobre, hard-wiring the three divisions of the armed forces into a consistent purchasing pattern (see NotiSur, 2004-03-05, 2002-10-04, 2002-02-01). With copper prices reaching a 16-year high of US$1.58 a pound in June and world reserves hitting a 30-year low, the copper-based budget of the Chilean military is likely to be higher than ever.

Some of the "renovation" plans are still underway, like the purchase of 10 F-16 fighter jets from the US, three Dutch frigates, and several English-Spanish submarines, acquisitions that should begin in 2006. The F-16 purchase will cost US$600 million. There are also plans to buy about 100 new German-made Leopard tanks and 20 used F-16's from Holland at a cost of US$150 million, to replace old Mirage jets. Some estimates say that Chile's weapons purchases may reach US$700 million this year. The government must first approve these and other purchases, which it has yet to do, something the head of the Navy said he expected the president to do in the middle of June.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute released a June 7 report that said Chile was the fourth-biggest spender on arms in Latin America, spending US$504 million between 2000 and

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