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Former Chilean Dictator Augusto Pinochet Dies at 91
by LADB Staff
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Former Chilean dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) who came to power in a US-backed coup against democratically elected Socialist President Salvador Allende (1970-1973) died on Dec. 10. Pinochet had experienced a heart attack one week earlier. The government of President Michelle Bachelet followed its promise not to allow official honors for Pinochet as a former head of state, but did allow him official honors as former head of the military.

Large street demonstrations after his death led to dozens of arrests and injuries, while funeral and memorial ceremonies provided an opportunity for the general's remaining supporters to turn out in the tens of thousands. Death was Pinochet's final escape from the multiple human rights and corruption indictments he faced.

Pinochet dies facing multiple indictments
A Dec. 3 heart attack caused Pinochet to be hospitalized shortly after his 91st birthday. The ongoing judicial processes against him included the cases relating to Operation Colombo, the Caravan of Death, and Villa Grimaldi (see NotiSur, 2003-04-25, 2005-06-03). He also faced charges for tax evasion, misappropriation of funds, and use of false passports. He had been placed under house arrest for the fourth time in late 2006 (see NotiSur, 2006-11-17).

After investigations implicated Pinochet and his family as tax evaders and holders of secret, overseas accounts with illegally obtained millions (see NotiSur, 2005-09-02 and 2005-12-09), support for the ex-dictator dropped away.

Many of the general's partisans had argued that he may have been a dictator, but that he ruled cleanly, without graft, and had stabilized the nation. US congressional investigations into alleged money laundering by the Pinochet family with Riggs Bank (see NotiSur, 2004-07-23 and 2005-01-07) ended his reputation as a non-thieving despot.

Some in Chile celebrated on Dec. 10 with champagne, but, for others, there was no joy in the death of Pinochet, only the sense of a final injustice by the dictator who brutally ruled the country for 17 years. For victims, Pinochet's demise dashed hopes that he would ever face justice for the torture and killings that were the hallmarks of his regime.

The streets of Santiago were a cacophony of car horns and cheering the night of his death, as Chileans took to the streets in droves to celebrate the demise of the person many consider South America's most notorious dictator. Estimates ranged from the tens to the hundreds of thousands of people in the streets. And while some came to lament his passing, the vast majority of those taking to the streets and plazas around the capital were celebrating the death, according to London Independent correspondent Jen Ross.

"This is a moment of freedom, of joy, and of catharsis for an entire nation that lived through one of the worst dictatorships of all of Latin America," said Daniela Lillo, a mother and actress who stood...
in Santiago's Plaza Italia with a glass of champagne in hand. With her four-year-old daughter in tow, she said her daughter would never forget this day and her first sip of champagne.

However, outside the hospital where Pinochet died, Chileans who believed he saved them from communism wept and hoisted posters with his image. Some chanted that Pinochet and his feared secret police were Chile's saviors. "He will live forever in my memory. I love him as much as my own children," said Margarita Sanchez.

Police clashed with demonstrators who threw rocks and erected fire barricades that sent up thick plumes of smoke and blocked traffic on the city's main avenue. Tear gas and water cannons were used to disperse the protesters, many of them masked, who quickly regrouped. Officials blamed the violence on a small contingent among the thousands of demonstrators who poured into the streets to denounce Pinochet's legacy.

At least two bank offices were damaged. The clashes spread past midnight to several working-class districts, and police said 23 officers, including a major and a captain, were injured. Deputy Interior Minister Felipe Harboe said that 43 police officers were injured in the clashes and 99 demonstrators were arrested.

"The government makes an appeal to peace," he said. "We do not want people to be affected today by facts of the past." Human rights activists: justice not served in time Many people said they were disappointed that Pinochet never had his day in court to answer for the 3,200 deaths and disappearances that took place under his rule. "Pinochet has died without ever receiving justice," said Carmen Soria, the daughter of a Spanish diplomat assassinated during the dictatorship. "The courts and four governments of the Concertacion [Chile's ruling coalition] were not able to condemn Pinochet."

Lorena Pizarro, president of an association of relatives of the dictatorship's victims, called Pinochet genocidal and said it was ironic he had died "on Dec. 10, the international human rights day." Human Rights Watch (HRW) said Pinochet pioneered the use of "disappearances" as a tool of repression and watched his reputation erode as prosecutors pursued complaints of human rights abuses.

"Pinochet spent his last years fending off an ever-tightening web of prosecutions in Chile and died a profoundly discredited figure in the land he once ruled," said Jose Miguel Vivanco, Americas director at Human Rights Watch. Emilio Alvarez Icaza, head of Mexico City's Human Rights Committee, called Pinochet "one of the clearest expressions of brutality in the flesh."

The former dictator's death "left me with a bittersweet taste because they didn't manage to prosecute him in his life for all the crimes he committed," Alvarez Icaza said. Susana Perez Gallard, co-president of the Permanent Human Rights Assembly in neighboring Argentina, said, "We have had a long wait for this man to be convicted for his crimes against humanity, but lamentably he passed away without it happening."

The London-based human rights group Amnesty International (AI) said Pinochet's death "should be a wake-up call for the authorities in Chile and governments everywhere, reminding them of the importance of speedy justice for human rights crimes, something Pinochet himself has now escaped."
Pinochet adopted a rare conciliatory tone on Nov. 25, his 91st birthday, when his wife Lucia Hiriart read a statement that fell short of an apology. "Today, near the end of my days, I want to say that I harbor no rancor against anyone, that I love my country above all, and that I take political responsibility for everything that was done, which had no other goal than making Chile greater and avoiding its disintegration," the statement said.

His supporters, 60,000 of whom press outlets said turned out to view his casket at the Santiago Military Academy, echoed Pinochet's stability argument. One man was briefly detained after he spat on the casket holding Pinochet's body at the academy. The man was identified as the grandson of Pinochet's predecessor Gen. Carlos Prats. Prats was killed in 1974 after opposing Pinochet's ouster of Allende's elected government (see NotiSur, 2003-07-25).

Prats' grandson says he considers Pinochet the killer of his grandfather. According to an official report, 3,197 people were killed for political reasons in the 17 years after Pinochet overthrew the Allende government. More than 30,000 were tortured, many more illegally imprisoned, thousands forced into exile. A devout Roman Catholic, Pinochet often said he believed he acted on a God-given mission to fight communism.

In a 2003 interview with a Miami-based Spanish-language television station, he said he saw no reason to ask forgiveness for human rights violations committed during his right-wing dictatorship. "They are the ones, the Marxists, who should ask me for forgiveness," he said, recalling a 1986 attempt on his life in which five bodyguards were killed. "I never ordered anyone to be killed," Pinochet said. "I harbor no hatred or rancor. I am good, I consider myself an angel."

Allende picked Pinochet to lead Chile's military, convinced he was a loyalist who would back the constitutional government. The general had won the president's confidence by donning a helmet, grabbing a submachine gun, and leading loyal troops to put down a small uprising by soldiers in Santiago. He also helped quell a crippling truckers strike marked by daily riots in late 1972.

Records from that era indicate the CIA supported the strike as a way of undermining Chile's economy and Allende's government, which Washington feared was being used by Fidel Castro's Cuba to spread communism in the region.

At an April 1973 reception at the East German Embassy, Pinochet spoke out in defense of what he called Chile's right to follow its own political path. Then, 19 days after Allende promoted him to Army commander, Pinochet sent warplanes, tanks, and troops against the presidential palace.

"Unconditional surrender, unconditional surrender," Pinochet ordered an officer who reported that Allende was offering to negotiate. In the same recording of that day's military radio traffic, Pinochet said that all Allende would be offered was an airplane to take him and his family out of the country. "And then the plane goes down," Pinochet is heard saying with a laugh. As Air Force jets bombed the presidential palace, Allende reportedly killed himself with a submachine gun given to him by Castro.

**President Bachelet limits official honors**

Chile's government declared that Pinochet would not receive the state funeral normally granted to former presidents, but only military honors at the Santiago military academy. Bachelet, who lost her father and suffered torture and exile under Pinochet's regime, maintained her stance that it would
be a violation of her conscience to give state honors to the general who violently shut down one of South America's oldest continuous democratic governments.

"For Chileans, and not just me, it would be a violation to render honors to a person involved in the violations of human rights and fiscal moneys," said Bachelet on Dec. 4, shortly after Pinochet's heart attack. The family called on the government not to send a representative to the funeral, and Defense Minister Vivianne Blanlot, the government's only representative at the funeral, was booed when she arrived. "Go away, go away!" many mourners chanted.

Pinochet's younger daughter, Jacqueline, eased tensions by shaking Blanlot's hand at the moment of exchanging peace wishes in the Roman Catholic mass. Grandson praises coup at funeral, drummed out of military At the funeral, Army Capt. Augusto Pinochet Molina said that his grandfather, "in the midst of the Cold War, defeated Marxism, which attempted to impose its totalitarian model, not through the vote, but rather by armed means."

Blanlot said that the remarks by Pinochet's grandson were a surprise, and she expected the Army would "take measures" as military officers are not allowed to discuss politics publicly.

Afterwards, Bachelet said, "During the ceremony, an official overstepped the line of command without authorization to speak, abruptly expressing political opinions against the state and certain sectors of society. This constitutes a grave insult. We are sure that the Army will know what its duty is."

Commanders expelled Capt. Pinochet Molina from the military shortly thereafter. They denied that the government had pressured them and said that Pinochet Molina had shown a failure of military discipline and caused harm to the Army. [Sources: El Universal (Venezuela), El Universo (Ecuador), 12/04/06; Reforma (Mexico), 12/05/06; BBC News, 01/07/01, 11/25/06, 12/03/06, 12/05/06, 12/11/06; The New York Times, 12/10/06, 12/11/06; Los Tiempos (Bolivia), The Independent (UK), www.nationalreview.com, www.salon.com, 12/11/06; La Tercera (Chile), 11/14/06, 12/11/06, 12/12/06; The Miami Herald, 11/22/06, 12/04/06, 12/12/06; Bloomberg, 11/27/06, 12/03/06, 12/04/06, 12/11/06, 12/12/06; Clarin (Argentina), 12/11/06, 12/12/06; Los Angeles Times, National Security Archive www.nsarchive.org, 12/12/06; Associated Press, 12/04/06, 12/05/06, 12/10-13/06; El Tiempo (Colombia), The Economist (UK), Ultimas Noticias (Venezuela), 12/13/06; www.democracynow.org, 11/17/06, 12/11/06, 12/13/06, 12/14/06; El Comercio (Ecuador), 12/14/06; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 11/14/06, 11/16/06, 12/04-06/06, 12/11-13/06, 12/15/06; El Mercurio (Chile), 12/04/06, 12/10-15/06; www.counterpunch.org, 11/17/06, 12/04/06, 12/11/06, 12/12/06, 12/16-17/06; www.telesurtv.net, 11/14/06, 11/27/06, 12/11-15/06, 01/03/06]

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