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Chile: Pinochet Victims Wary Of President Pinera

by LADB Staff

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Despite his promise of a unified "second transition" for Chile, incoming President Sebastian Pinera will likely have trouble winning over the many Chileans who suffered directly under the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). For them, the new leader's conservative background and tough law-and-order message are uncomfortably evocative of the country's authoritarian past. Pinera, Chile's first rightist leader since Pinochet and its first democratically elected conservative president in more than half a century, has long tried to distance himself from the infamous military strongman. In 1988, Pinochet held a "yes" or "no" referendum on his stay in power, a miscalculation that ultimately ended his 17-year dictatorship. Pinera famously voted "no" in the plebiscite, a fact he was eager to remind the Chilean public during a campaign that ended in victory this past January against former President Eduardo Frei (1994-2000) of the center-left Concertacion coalition (see NotiSur, 2010-01-22). More recently, in statements directed against Cuba, Pinera painted his new government as a champion of human rights both at home and abroad. On March 26, the new president told reporters he is "convinced Chile can and must play a coherent and central role in the promotion and defense of the values of democracy and human rights in Latin America and the rest of the world." Here in Chile, that commitment to human rights means picking up where the last government left off and thus respecting ongoing investigations into Pinochet-era rights abuses, Rossy Lama, the new executive secretary of the Programa de Derechos Humanos of the Ministerio de Interior, explained last month. Chile's previous government was led by President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010), a member of the Partido Socialista, who was detained and tortured during the Pinochet regime. Bachelet was the last of four consecutive Concertacion presidents who together held power for two decades. "The objectives continue to be the same," Lama told the daily La Nacion last month. "We will continue processing cases, weather they're related to people who were detained and disappeared or executed for political reasons. We'll do so in the same way, with the same team that was working before." Reopening a window to the past One of those objectives involves the Valech Commission, a research committee originally convened by Bachelet's predecessor, President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), to detail Pinochet-era abuses (see NotiSur, 2004-11-19). Known officially as the Comision Nacional sobre la Detencion Politica y la Tortura, the committee led by Bishop Sergio Valech spent six months accepting testimony from dictatorship victims and went on to produce an influential report that confirmed some 27,000 instances of torture. Victims whose testimony the committee deemed legitimate qualified for modest government reparation pensions of approximately US$240 per month. The study was released in two parts, the first in 2004 and the second in 2005. A separate report, the Rettig Report, released in 1991, focused specifically on political killings under the Pinochet regime. The study confirmed close to 3,200 assassinations and/or disappearances (see NotiSur, 2001-01-12). In mid February, just weeks before Bachelet left office, the outgoing government reopened the Valech report to new testimony, a move welcomed by critics who had long complained that the committee's original six-month research period was too brief and not well-publicized. The report's reopening offers a second opportunity to people who either because of time constraints or because they simply did not know about the process were previously unable to share their stories and thus qualify for government reparations. Unlike the original Valech committee, which only accepted testimony...
related to torture and detention, researchers this time around are accepting information regarding killings and disappearances as well the domain originally of the Rettig Report. Officially relaunched Feb. 17, the Valech committee will accept testimony until mid-August. The group will spend another half year reviewing the new material. So far, researchers have already received some 3,000 new testimonies. "Without a doubt it's important," Lorena Pizarro, president of the Agrupacion de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (AFDD), told NotiSur. "It's crucial that the victims of state terrorism, such as the direct family members of those who lost their lives or were made to disappear, have the right to give their testimonies and be recognized by the state as victims of the murders that occurred in this country." Victims' family members hardly convinced Still, for Pizarro and others who have spent the past three decades clamoring for recognition and demanding accountability for human rights violators, neither reopening the Valech commission nor Pinera's pro-human rights rhetoric do much to allay their concerns about Chile's sudden shift to the right. Even before Pinera took office (see NotiSur, 2010-03-26), they say, the political sea change sparked a resurgence of symbols, style, and even personnel associated with Pinochet's military dictatorship. True, Pinera may have voted "no" in the Pinochet plebiscite. But just a few months later, his critics point out, Pinera assumed the role of campaign chief for the dictator's anointed candidate in the 1989 elections, economist Hernan Buchi, Pinochet's finance minister from 1985 to 1989. Buchi lost the election but went on to found the conservative Santiago think tank Libertad y Desarrollo, from which Pinera recently plucked several of his top Cabinet members. "This was an institution created after the departure of the Pinochet government by people who worked in that government, in some sense to protect the architecture of the Chilean economic model," said Ricardo Matte, an economics analyst with Libertad y Desarrollo. "Our job was to prevent that building from coming down. The [center-left] Concertacion coalition, which is now leaving after 20 years, was saying they would change everything." Pinera administration officials connected to Libertad y Desarrollo include top government spokesperson Eva Von Baer, General Secretary to the Presidency Cristian Larroulet, and Planning Minister Felipe Kast. Larroulet, until recently the think tank's executive director, worked directly for the Pinochet government, as did Pinera's Education Minister Joaquin Lavin (see NotiSur, 2010-02-19). Another throwback that has resurfaced under the new administration is Chile's official motto, "Por la Razon o la Fuerza" (either by reason or force), a motto that fell out of fashion during two decades of Concertacion leadership but features prominently on Pinera's new government logo, unveiled in early March. Pinera also raised eyebrows in late March when he named Gen. Oscar Izurieta Ferrer, until recently the country's top military official, as his new undersecretary of defense. Izurieta was a second lieutenant at the time of the coup. By the time the military regime ended, he had gained the rank of lieutenant colonel. During Bachelet's time in office, Izurieta served as the Chilean Army's commander in chief. "I'm worried. Really worried," said Norma Reyes Villega, whose brother-in-law disappeared in 1975. "Worried about human rights. Worried that the trials won't continue, that they'll close the book on all this, that there won't be justice for the people who died." Reyes Villega added, "They didn't just up and go, as we were told. [Pinochet forces] made them disappear. We were told they'd left their wives, gone off with other women. That's what we were told." Burying the dead, not the hatchet Reyes Villega was one of dozens of people who gathered March 26 outside Santiago's Cementerio General for a ceremony dedicated to the victims of a 1973 massacre known as the Hornos de Lonquen case. In October 1973, roughly a month after the Sept. 11 coup that overthrew then President Salvador Allende (1970-1973), police in the rural community of Isla del Maipo, south of Santiago, rounded up 15 residents. Like so many people arrested in the aftermath of the coup, they were never seen or heard from again. Nothing was known of the victims until 1978, when a priest tipped off by a church confession
discovered human remains in a pair of abandoned coke ovens near the town of Lonquen, just a few miles from Isla del Maipo. Forensic experts later identified the remains as belonging to the 15 Isla del Maipo arrestees. Although it was originally assumed police threw the victims in the Lonquen ovens after shooting them, more-recent evidence suggest the detainees were beaten to death. Family members originally planned to bury what was left of their loved ones in 1979. Before they were able to do that, however, Pinochet's secret police snatched the remains and threw them into a common grave in Isla del Maipo. The bones were dug up again in 2006 for further studies. Not until now 37 years after the massacre were the remains finally returned to the victims' surviving relatives. "We waited 37 years for a dignified funeral," said Emilio Astudillo, whose father and two older brothers were killed in the massacre. Astudillo was 16 years old at the time. He is now a member of Isla del Maipo's city council. "We don't need members of the government, this government, to go [to the funeral], because many of them were accomplices during the dictatorship, because many of them looked the other way when people were arrested and disappeared, because for many of them, it was easier not to say what was happening in our country," said Astudillo. "For that reason, we're telling the people leading the country right now that you're not invited to the farewell for our loved ones. The people of Chile, the workers, housewives, and students we who have been permanently committed those are the people who are invited to bid farewell to these martyrs."

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