Chile’s “Never Again” General Charged in “Caravan of Death” Killings

Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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

Recommended Citation

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.
Chile’s ‘Never Again’ General Charged in ‘Caravan of Death’ Killings

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Category/Department: Chile
Published: 2016-07-22

A former Army chief who played a leading role in Chile’s post-dictatorship political transition is now being called to answer for his actions decades earlier, at the outset of the brutal military regime led by Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990).

Juan Emilio Cheyre, a retired general, turned himself over to authorities on July 7 after a judge in Santiago, Chile’s capital, charged him with complicity in the 1973 murders of 15 political prisoners. The victims were among the thousands of people rounded up during and after the coup because of their suspected sympathies for the deposed president, Salvador Allende (1970-1973), who died during the military uprising. Cheyre, 69, spent five days in a military detention facility outside of Santiago before being released on bail (of less than US$500) pending further proceedings in the case, one of several linked to the infamous “Caravan of Death.”

The Caravan of Death was an elite military unit that, in the weeks following the Sept. 11, 1973, putsch—and on direct orders from Pinochet—traveled by helicopter between various military outposts, selecting specific prisoners at each stop for summary execution. Rights groups believe the death squad ordered or directly killed nearly 100 people. The unit’s leader, Gen. Sergio Arellano Stark, died earlier this year. He was 94. Overall, the Pinochet regime is believed to have killed and/or disappeared at least 3,000 people. Thousands more were arbitrarily detained and tortured.

One of the Caravan of Death’s murderous stops was at an Army base in the northern city of La Serena, where Cheyre, then a 25-year-old lieutenant, was stationed. The visit took place on Oct. 16, 1973, and left 15 people dead. Though only a junior officer at the time, Cheyre was presumably aware of the killings as they occurred and thus bears legal responsibility, Mario Carroza, the investigative judge in charge of this and a number of other high-profile dictatorship-era cases, concluded. “The essential element is his knowledge of what took place during the three hours that the convoy (Caravan of Death) was in La Serena,” Carroza told reporters.

The judge implicated a handful of other former military men in the case as well, including Ariosto Lapostol, the base commander at the time. For now, though, all the attention is on Cheyre, whose notoriety in Chile has less to do with his record during the dictatorship than it does with the star turn he took as a forward-looking “peacemaker” during the presidency of Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), Chile’s third-post Pinochet leader. Lagos’s democratic predecessors were Patricio Aylwin (1990-1994), who died in April, and Eduardo Frei (1994-2000).

A mea culpa of sorts
The transition to democracy in 1990, a decade before Lagos was elected, came with some serious strings attached, one of them being that Pinochet stay on as commander-in-chief of the Army for another eight years. The caudillo’s influence over the military was still palpable, therefore, when President Lagos appointed Cheyre as the Army head in 2002. Cheyre proved to be a propitious choice, grabbing headlines for himself—and giving Lagos a boost in the process—when he insisted
in a 2003 speech that Chile ought never again (nunca más) to experience the political violence and deep-seated divisions that led to and were exacerbated by the coup.

As a “mea culpa,” it was rather tepid: Cheyre placed much of the blame on the civilian authorities that led Chile before the putsch. “I’m saying never again to a political class that was incapable of controlling the crisis that culminated in 1973,” he said. But he also promised the Army would “never again” commit human rights violations, a statement that, in light of the military’s previous disregard for the issue, was hailed as a turning-point admission of wrongdoing.

As a follow-up to his iconic “never again” proclamations, Cheyre penned an open letter in late 2004 titled “Ejército de Chile: El fin de una visión” (Chilean Army: End of a Vision) (NotiSur, Nov. 19, 2004). In it, the general explained how the Cold War mindset at the time of the coup led to “the imposition of a logic of confrontation” whereby “people who were only adversaries were instead considered enemies.” Cheyre went on to say, however, that the ideological context shouldn’t serve as an excuse for the military’s misdeeds. “Human rights violations never, and for no one, have an ethical justification,” he wrote.

The letter helped seal Cheyre’s status as the modern face of the Chilean military and boost his standing with Lagos and others in the center-left Concertación coalition, a four-party political bloc that held power for 20 years (1990-2010) before finally being unseated by Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014), a conservative. The Concertación returned to power in 2014, though in a modified form due to President Michelle Bachelet’s decision, during her campaign, to ally with the Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh) and other far-left factions. The bloc now goes by the name Nueva Mayoría (New Majority).

Chyre has allies on the political right as well. Following his tenure as commander-in-chief of the Army, which ended in 2006, he secured a top-level post at the conservative Universidad Católica (UC). And in 2012, then President Piñera tapped Cheyre to serve in the Servicio Electoral de Chile (SERVEL), the country’s top electoral authority. Soon after, Cheyre’s SERVEL colleagues appointed him president of the body.

**Skeletons in the closet**

Chyre’s post as the SERVEL head seemed to mark the culmination of his journey from military man to democrat. But it also turned new attention to his pre-democracy past. Human rights groups grumbled openly about his proximity to the Caravan of Death killings in La Serena. There was talk, too, about Cheyre’s alleged role in the “abduction” of a small child named Ernesto Lejderman, whose parents were murdered by the military.

In 2013, as Chile was preparing to mark the 40th anniversary of the coup, the story of the orphaned child went from side note to show-stopper when Lejderman, now a middle-aged man living as an Argentine, met face-to-face with Cheyre on a news program produced by TVN, Chile’s national television network (NotiSur, Sept. 20, 2013).

Lejderman’s parents were foreigners (his mother was Mexican, his father Argentine) living in Chile at the time of the military overthrow. Soldiers hunted the couple down and killed them, in December 1973, but spared their son, who was just two. Lejderman was taken to a nearby military base and handed over to Cheyre, who then delivered the toddler to a convent. The boy was later returned to his paternal grandparents in Argentina. “Why all these years of silence?” Lejderman
asked Cheyre during their televised encounter. “Chilean society as a whole is asking for an answer. Not just me.”

A witness has also come forward of late claiming that shortly after the coup, Cheyre tortured and interrogated him. Nicolás Barrantes, 17 when the events in question took place, is the brother of Marco Barrantes, one of the 15 people killed in La Serena by the Caravan of Death. He says the blindfold that his captors placed over his eyes was loose enough for him to make out the features of his interrogator, and that later, when Cheyre became a well-known public figure, he was able to put two-and-two together. “I saw photos of him. The mouth is unmistakable. Then I heard his voice on television. It’s the same person who tortured me on the base in La Serena,” Barrantes said last month during a TVN news interview.

‘An indisputable truth’

Cheyre’s attorney, Jorge Bofill, says the case against his client is baseless. Just because he knew about the Caravan of Death executions when he was a lieutenant doesn’t make him “complicit,” Bofill told El Mercurio. Given the context of events, furthermore, Cheyre can’t be faulted, the lawyer explained, for not reporting the deaths to some kind of higher authority. “That kind of insubordination would have gotten him shot,” Bofill said.

Jaime Ravinet—a Concertación veteran who served as defense minister under Lagos and later reprised the role under Piñera—also came out in support of Cheyre. “Disobeying orders was simply impossible for him in a time of war,” Ravinet told CNN Chile. “Without a doubt, there’s a desire for revenge on the part of left-wing sectors and family members of the victims,” he added, calling Judge Carroza’s arrest order “absurd.”

Statements by Ravinet and other old-guard Concertación figures underscore just how much Cheyre is unique with regards to these kinds of dictatorship-era legal cases. People who built their careers opposing Pinochet and decrying the regime’s legacy of repression are, in this instance, defending the accused. “Frankly, I’m surprised that they even decided to process him,” journalist Javier Rebolledo, a human rights expert, told Radio Concierto. “There weren’t many people who thought Carroza would go through with this.”

Rights advocates, for their part, are thrilled by Carroza’s decision, which is all the more significant, they argue, because of Cheyre’s political clout. “Cheyre was there the day they shot 15 people in La Ñerena,” Hugo Gutiérrez, a congressional PCCh deputy and human rights lawyer, told Diario Uchile. “It’s an indisputable truth. But it’s so obvious that nobody wanted to see it.”

Gutiérrez and others challenge the suggestion that they’re out for some kind of revenge, or that the courts, given how much time has elapsed since the crimes took place, should simply turn the page. “If I told you I feel happy, that would be a lie, because happiness would be having my mother and father with me again,” Ernesto Lejderman, commenting on Judge Carroza’s decision to go after Cheyre, told El Diario de Cooperativa. “I just think the Chilean justice system’s willingness to pursue a soldier who has a lot of power and a lot of political support is an important gesture and sends a healthy message to the society as a whole.”

Jury verdict in Florida

Less than two weeks earlier, incidentally, human rights advocates celebrated another major legal development, albeit one that took place nearly 7,000 km away, in Orlando, Florida, where on June
27 a federal jury found an ex-Army lieutenant from Chile, Pedro Pablo Barrientos, liable for the 1973 killing of famed Chilean folk singer Víctor Jara. The court ordered the plaintiff to pay US$28 million to Jara’s family.

The civil case against Barrientos dates back nearly three years, when the California-based human rights organization Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA) submitted a suit—on behalf of Jara’s widow and two daughters—accusing the Chilean-born soldier of arbitrary detention; extrajudicial killing; and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment (NotiSur, Oct. 18, 2013). The complaint claimed that Barrientos “not only led, with other Chilean Army officers, the arbitrary detention and brutal torture of Víctor Jara, but also personally participated in the execution of Víctor Jara on or about Sept. 15, 1973, and then ordered his subordinates to repeatedly shoot Víctor Jara’s corpse.”

Jara was one of thousands rounded up shortly after the Sept. 11, 1973, military takeover and transported to a makeshift Santiago prison camp in what was then known as the Estadio Chile. The stadium has since been renamed in Jara’s honor (NotiSur, Sept. 12, 2003). Investigators believe the singer-songwriter was separated from the main group of prisoners and tortured during the course of several days. His lifeless body was discovered a few days later near the city’s Cementerio Municipal.

Chilean authorities filed an extradition request for Barrientos, a naturalized US citizen, in early 2013 but have not yet received any response from the US government. Jara’s nearly 90-year-old widow, Joan Jara Turner, hopes the Orlando ruling will put pressure on the US to honor the extradition request so that Barrientos can eventually face a criminal trial. “Today, there is some justice for Víctor’s death and for the other families in Chile who have sought truth,” Jara Turner said of the jury decision. “I hope that the verdict continues the healing.”

-- End --