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Americas Watch Report: Chileans Intimidated By Government Throughout Plebiscite Campaign

by John Neagle

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On July 31, Americas Watch (a private human rights organization based in Washington) released a report on what it describes as a broad panorama of human rights violations from January 1987 through the first half of 1988. The report focuses on Chilean laws and procedures affecting citizens' political rights. According to Americas Watch, the current campaign for a plebiscite on a single presidential candidate has thus far taken place under conditions of extreme intimidation exercised by Gen. Augusto Pinochet's government. In the plebiscite, the electorate will vote "yes" or "no" for a candidate selected by commanders of the armed forces and the police, including Pinochet. The government has not yet announced the date of the plebiscite, expected to take place before year-end. The candidate is expected to be Pinochet. According to current legislation, if the general is rejected by the electorate, he would continue in the presidency for another year, and then become senator for life. Americas Watch stated that even assuming the government candidate loses in the plebiscite, there are no adequate guarantees that civilians will be permitted to effectively rule Chile or create an "authentic democracy." Consequently, the military stands to permanently dominate the government. The report acknowledges that most opposition political groups in Chile consider the plebiscite to be the best available alternative, since it represents the possibility of having the electorate express opinions of the Pinochet government. Americas Watch asserts that Chilean citizens do not enjoy minimum civil and political rights: dissidents continue to be victims of disappearance, arbitrary arrest, summary execution, torture, threats, exile, and the absence of judicial processes that would serve as protection against such abuses. The military regime, said the report, uses "terrorism" as justification for repression, directed not only against the political opposition, but also against human rights observers, journalists, minors and community organizers. Of 8.3 million Chileans of voting age, over 6 million have been registered. The political opposition has carried out voter registration drives for months. According to Americas Watch, persons involved in such efforts have been subjected to systematic intimidation, as well as being denied access to television. Next, the government has applied strong pressure on citizens to register under parties which support the government, and to vote "yes" in the plebiscite. One of the organization's principal concerns is the widespread violence in Chile. The government, said the report, is responsible for the lion's share of violence in the past year and a half. In 1987, government security forces tortured one of every five persons arrested during demonstrations and other protest activities related to the opposition campaign to vote "no" in the plebiscite. Young people involved in voter registration drives were regularly beaten. In a series of operations coordinated by the military and the police, at least 12 were killed. Six persons died while in police custody, and five were disappeared. (Basic data from AP, 07/30/88)

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