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Chile: Political Prisoners' Hunger Strike & Related Events

by Erika Harding

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Oct. 1: Six political prisoners held in the Santiago public jail began a hunger strike to demand the immediate release of all political prisoners who remain incarcerated. Oct. 15: President Patricio Aylwin told University of Santiago students that the number of political prisoners dropped from 380 to 83 during his term in office. Aylwin said that all persons sentenced to prison terms for political reasons e.g., illegal association, illegal immigration, and weapons possession have been pardoned and released. Individuals convicted of other politically-motivated charges (mainly homicide and assault), could not be immediately pardoned because such have not yet been closed by the military court system. Oct. 18: Relatives of political prisoners and members of religious and human rights organizations occupied the offices of the Archbishop of Santiago, the Chilean Human Rights Commission and the United Workers Central (CUT). Oct. 22: President Aylwin rejected statements by National Renovation Party leader Andres Allamand that his government is "soft" on crime, and denied links between crime and the ongoing process of releasing political prisoners. Oct. 25: The Independent Democratic Union (UDI) reiterated Allamand's assertions. UDI Deputy Pablo Longueira said, "You don't create a social ambience against crime by releasing the most dangerous criminals the terrorists." Carabineros (military police) arrested approximately 25 of about 500 protesters marching in downtown Santiago demanding freedom for the remaining 83 political prisoners. Nov. 5: Police dispersed several hundred demonstrators in Santiago with water cannon and tear gas. Twenty-five persons were detained. By Nov. 5, the 38th day of the prisoners' hunger strike, three of the six had been hospitalized. Nov. 6: In a joint statement, Msgr. Carlos Gonzalez, Sen. Maximo Pacheco, Deputy Andres Aylwin, Socialist Party president Jorge Arrate, and Punto Final magazine director Manuel Cabieses demanded a speed-up of political prisoners' trials, and proposed a deadline for sentencing. Nov. 8: Police used water cannon to disperse protesters outside the La Moneda presidential palace, and arrested 21 people. In compliance with a Supreme Court ruling, police ordered the transfer of four hunger strikers to the Salvador hospital. Health Minister Jorge Jimenez confirmed the government's determination to force feed the hunger strikers. Nov. 9: The eight political prisoners held at the Santo Domingo Women's Prison commenced a five-day hunger strike in support of demands for the release of political prisoners. Nov. 12: Carabineros reported that 258 people were arrested and dozens injured during demonstrations at the presidential palace in Santiago. Santiago municipal official Luis Pareto said only 48 protesters were detained. Demonstrators threw stones and molotov cocktails at police, who responded with tear gas, batons, and water cannon. After the demonstration, four bombs exploded in separate locations in Santiago, including at UDI headquarters. No casualties were reported. Nov. 13: After 45 days, the four remaining hunger strikers ended their protest action. Nov. 14: The Chamber of Deputies unanimously approved the appointment of 30 additional judges in order to accelerate processing of political prisoner cases. The measure must also be approved by the Senate, the Constitutional Court and President Aylwin. Nov. 15: The Interior Ministry issued orders to the mayors of Santiago and Valparaiso to commence legal proceedings against participants in recent pro-political prisoner demonstrations. According to Interior Ministry legal counsel Luis Toro,

sanctions are to be based on penal code article 485 which prohibits damage to public and private property. Convicted persons would face 61 days to three years in prison, and/or cash penalties. Nov. 19: The Senate committee on constitution, legislation, justice and government rejected President Aylwin's proposal to provisionally release persons who have been detained for over two years and not yet sentenced. Instead, the committee approved a recommendation by political opposition parties for processing on a case-by-case basis. [Sources: Radio Havana, 10/25/91; La Tercera (Chile), 11/02/91; Inter Press Service, 11/05/91, 11/13/91; Notimex, 11/13/91; Spanish news service EFE, 10/19/91, 11/03/91, 11/05/91, 11/08/91, 11/13/91, 11/14/91; La Nacion (Chile), 10/19/91, 10/24/91, 10/26/91, 10/31/91, 11/01/91, 11/05-07/91, 11/09/91, 11/10/91, 11/12/91, 11/14/91; La Epoca (Chile), 11/13/91, 11/15/91; El Mercurio (Chile), 10/16/91, 10/20/91, 10/23/91, 10/26/91, 10/31/91, 11/02/91, 11/05/91, 11/06/91, 11/09/91, 11/10/91, 11/12-15/91, 11/20/91; Agence France- Presse, 10/20/91, 10/23/91, 10/25/91, 11/03-07/91, 11/09/91, 11/11-13/91, 11/21/91]

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