

“Giving amnesty to the fascists has left a gaping wound in the people”: Relatives of Pinochet’s victims speak to the World Socialist Web Site

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Several Chilean nationals flew to London this week to appeal to the House of Lords against the High Court decision upholding immunity for former dictator Augusto Pinochet. They included Isabel Allende, daughter of President Salvador Allende killed in Pinochet’s 1973 coup; Sofia Pratts, daughter of General Carlos Pratts, the former Chilean military chief of staff who had opposed the coup; Sola Sierra, president of the Association of Relatives of the Arrested & Disappeared in Chile; Joyce Horman, wife of Charles Horman, an American citizen whose disappearance was depicted in the 1982 film *Missing*; Juan Pablo Letelier, son of Orlando Letelier, minister of defence and foreign affairs in the deposed government of President Salvador Allende, killed in 1976 while exiled in the United States.

Scores of others will be submitting testimony on the cases of their own “disappeared” relatives for consideration by the House of Lords. A public hearing for the testimony of victims of the Pinochet regime was arranged by Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn at the House of Commons on November 3. Corbyn was one of 75 signatories to a parliamentary motion supporting Pinochet’s arrest.

In total 10 people, including those mentioned above, read their testimony in front of the media. Many more wrote down their statements and delivered them to the House of Lords.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several of those present.

Sola Sierra is the president of the Association of Relatives of the Arrested & Disappeared in Chile. Her husband, Waldo Pizarro Molina, is one of those arrested who subsequently disappeared. She was also representing 1,198 other arrested/disappeared in Chile, and 79 arrested outside Chile who were taken back to the country and then disappeared. Only 172 bodies have been found to date.

“My husband was arrested and disappeared on December 15, 1976. I have come to England to give testimony in the name of the association. For us the question of the legality of what is happening here—whether or not Pinochet has diplomatic immunity in the eyes of British law—is the least important consideration. The person who is asking for protection, who is looking to the international laws to shelter him, is a terrorist, is a perpetrator of genocide, is someone who violated human rights in Chile, thereby violating the fundamental Bill of Rights. He is responsible for a string of people who disappeared, were tortured, are dead, exiled, and thousands of political prisoners who can’t exercise their citizen’s rights because of missing records, and so on.

“All this was decided and ordered by Pinochet’s regime. And yet today, when he finds himself in the unexpected position of being denounced by the international community, he appeals to those arguments that he always despised, such as humane treatment. We believe that an arrogant,

dominant, inhuman man such as Augusto Pinochet, who has committed such actions against humanity, has no right to immunity. We don’t just say this because it is Pinochet. We have proof of the conduct of the security forces under his direct command. They acted against thousands of compatriots, for the sole crime of thinking differently, who were eliminated under horrendous tortures and their remains hidden so they could not be found by their families and given a decent burial.

“I have come to try and influence the decision taken by the House of Lords on the appeal against the decision of the High Court. I gave my statement before Lord Ashbury, who is going to take it to the Commission of the House of Lords.

“Our association was founded in 1974. Since then it has fought tirelessly to find all the arrested/disappeared. We have fought to demand justice, to denounce the courts that were accomplices of these acts and to publicise the fact that there will never be justice in Chile while there exists an amnesty law decreed by the dictator Pinochet to pardon himself. This government today has not got the political will to revoke this amnesty law so that the tribunals in Chile can investigate and punish the criminals.

“We have been asking for this law to be revoked since 1990, when the government of Patricio Aylwin took power, and particularly since the government of Eduardo Frei took power, in which the Socialist Party is represented.

“They, the socialists, organised some demonstrations over Pinochet taking up his post as Senator-for-Life, but when Pinochet agreed the ‘unión nacional’ (national union), the socialists, voted in favour. They voted for a unity that is not possible, until truth and justice exists.

“Are we hopeful in the outcome of this campaign? Well, during the 25 years we have been fighting we have only received unhelpful responses, but that has not prevented us from continuing to struggle because we know we have the right to justice. Not only for our relatives but also for Chile, for humanity, it is impermissible for a criminal to be free, however high the rank he has achieved through blood and fire. Whatever the outcome we hope that humanity prevails against their crimes.

“If they let Pinochet go, the process in Spain will continue and we will continue supporting it and helping it and demanding that the promises the right-wing have made of an investigation in Chile are fulfilled.”

Mariana Guzmán Nuñez is a committee member of the Association of Relatives of the Arrested & Disappeared. Her husband, Jaime Donato Avendaño, was arrested and disappeared on May 5, 1976.

“Since my husband disappeared I have never heard anything about what happened to him. All I know is that he was in Villa Grimaldi. There are witnesses who saw him there. Those who went through Villa Grimaldi suffered the cruellest tortures. All of us hope that our detained did not

suffer too much, that they did not live long. We don't know where their remains were taken. Even today, it is still not recognised that they were detained before disappearing. Justice in my country means most of the lawsuits are closed, and then there is this amnesty law left by Pinochet.

"We have appealed to the legislative body for this law to be revoked, but the parliamentarians say that since they are not the majority they cannot support us. So the law sits there, we don't know until when. Aylwin, the first president after Pinochet, took some interest in our problem. He used to receive us and talk to us and showed that at least he was aware of what we had gone through. But Eduardo Frei, the current president of Chile, has never received us and he never answers any of our letters.

"The so-called 'peaceful transitions' in many countries are covering up and trying to forget what can't be forgotten or covered up. Giving amnesty to the fascists has left a gaping wound in the people. That is why the youth today are more rebellious. The youth in Chile are conscious of what happened, they know there are many things that have not been clarified or resolved, not only in terms of the extermination policy but also the social problems like health, education, housing. And that is going to have consequences.

"I know that the CIA was responsible for many things that happened in our country and there are many matters they have to answer to. There were many other countries in Latin America in that epoch that had dictatorships supported by the CIA. One way or another we have managed to find out the interference of the United States in these countries, and also interference of the secret police who, through Operation Condor, arrested citizens of one country exiled in another. The military received training from the United States. That is the explanation of the system of extermination in the Latin American countries.

"We hope that what is happening today will hold important lessons for people world-wide. Perhaps we will not achieve many of our objectives, but these will be achieved by future generations. I hope my children and my grandchildren will live in a more just society, as well as the children of other countries.

"It is very difficult to be left-wing today in Chile. There were many years of dictatorship when they had the press and television in their control and they promoted a lot of hatred of communism, as they are doing today.

"There are very few freedoms. You have seen the pictures on television of water cannon used against protesters. The right wing has the upper hand. They have the economic power, the military power, the contacts abroad. There were many compromises and agreements between those who were going to take over government and the military.

"The social situation is very bad. The cost of living is very high, wages are very low. No social reforms have been restored, not even reforms passed by presidents before Allende. Teachers have been on strike, and after 28 days they have won absolutely nothing. Most people are on three-month contracts at work. They are sacked and they employ somebody else for another three months, and so on. Most people will never have pensions; nobody has long term contracts. There is no free education. Even at the municipal schools you have to pay an admission fee and then more during the year to keep your child at school. They are minimal fees, but for people earning minimal wages it is a lot. So things haven't changed very much in Chile since Pinochet stood down."

Mercedes Rojas is the wife of Oscar Rojas who disappeared in Chile in 1981. She is a nurse who now lives in London

"We are trying to develop an awareness of what happened in Chile. As long as there is no truth and no justice, there can be no reconciliation. The case of Pinochet shows there are weaknesses in this area. It is a shame for this government to give him immunity. They are defending Pinochet. We want human rights to be respected.

"Look at the difference between him and our relatives. He is kept in

privileged conditions—no tortures, well cared for, visited by his family, the best lawyers; given an opportunity to defend himself, none of which he granted his victims.

"All we want is for British justice to allow him to be judged in whatever country. We don't want compensation, but justice. We have confidence that people in Britain will exercise pressure on the authorities. Perhaps the government might feel ashamed to have opened the doors to a dictator. We are appealing to their morals, principles and human values.

"My husband was a draughtsman. He was a member of the committee of his local trade union who fought for social rights. After the military coup he was arrested and sentenced to seven years. He served three and a half and then we came to Britain. In 1980 he returned to Chile secretly and disappeared. I was getting ready to go too.

"Our family searched for him to no avail. I received no letters. Finally the Chilean ambassador here admitted that he was being held in prison. This was later denied, saying that there had been an error in the exchange of information. They said that the person had said "it was the most likely event" that he had been detained. The communication to us had been only verbal and, later on, they couldn't quite remember the meeting even taking place.

"In 1990 or '91 the Rettig Commission was set up in Chile to try to clarify what had happened with the disappeared. Their report just established some facts and the bodies that had been responsible. It did not lead to justice. But for us, it was the first time ever that an official voice had admitted that arrests, disappearances and tortures had taken place. At last we had an official document admitting this.

"The Chilean government had a historic opportunity to repeal the amnesty law so that these people could be punished, but it didn't.

"There still exist social pressures on people from the right. When the High Court here decided Pinochet would be given immunity from prosecution there were big celebrations in the streets by the right wing. Those who did not celebrate came under a lot of social pressure. Carmen Soria, the daughter of Carmelo Soria, one of the Spanish people who disappeared, has been sent death threats by the right wing. So have many others.

"We hope something will come out of this. If Pinochet is not tried at least we hope there will be a change in international opinion. There should be an international agreement to try those who have committed crimes against humanity. At least it will serve to educate the youth as to the magnitude of what happened in Chile."

Helia López gave testimony about her brother-in-law, Roberto Rodríguez Cárcamo, who was arrested and disappeared on September 19, 1973. He was a philosophy student.

"There are heads of state who hide behind the laws. If the judiciary cannot resolve this, there will be many more in the future. We want this case to set a precedent in the defence of human rights. This case exposes the weaknesses of the justice system.

"Can this sort of justice be left to governments? That depends on the character of the government, if it accepts the need for truth and justice. Allende's government was overthrown by foreign intervention. The Americans today don't want to intervene in the case against Pinochet because they fear the discovery of documents exposing their role in the coup. This situation puts them on trial too."



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