

September 11 in Chile—clashes on coup’s anniversary

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In Chile, September 11 was marked by violent clashes between demonstrators and Carabinero military police, resulting in over 500 arrests and scores of wounded.

While the media in the US and Western Europe concentrated exclusively on ceremonies marking the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Chile was rocked by protests in observance of the 29th anniversary of the US-backed coup that inaugurated 17 years of brutal military dictatorship.

That September 11, in 1973, also saw planes flying low over a country’s largest city, leaving one of its most important buildings in flames and its people in a state of shock. But in Chile it was the bombing of the La Moneda presidential palace, where the elected president, Salvador Allende, died. The attack inaugurated a bloodbath from which Chile has yet to recover.

Ironically, the official death toll in the Chilean coup—3,197—is almost identical to the number killed on September 11, 2001 in the US. Several hundred were machine-gunned in the Santiago soccer stadium, which was turned into a makeshift concentration camp and torture center. Others were shot to death in the street, at military barracks and in other detention centers, many after enduring horrific torture. All told, more than 60,000 Chileans were subjected to torture under the dictatorship, and one million were forced into exile: this in a country of less than 14 million.

On the 29th anniversary of that black day, the Socialist Party government of President Ricardo Lagos roundly condemned demonstrators for burning a US flag, calling it “insensitive.” Lagos, among Washington’s closest Latin American allies, attended a ceremony at the US embassy and declared that the two countries “are united on this date by tragedy and sadness.” The next day he issued a statement announcing Chile’s support for the positions outlined in Bush’s September 12 speech before the UN General Assembly threatening war against Iraq.

That many Chileans, while understanding the pain of those who lost relatives in the US, find it difficult to solidarize themselves with Washington is understandable. The Chilean coup was sponsored by Washington and the Central Intelligence Agency, which funneled millions of dollars to both the military and right-wing groups to overthrow the country’s elected government.

President Richard Nixon and his top foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger, played direct roles in orchestrating the military overthrow. The latter had famously remarked, “I don’t see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist because of the irresponsibility of its own people.”

Washington continued its backing for the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, with the CIA providing lists of suspected “subversives” to be exterminated. American aid helped the mass murderer stay in power longer than any other Latin American military ruler.

On Wednesday, thousands of people participated in a march to the Santiago cemetery to place wreaths at a memorial to the disappeared. At the La Moneda presidential palace they were met by Carabineros who used tear gas and water cannons to attack the protest.

Tensions later erupted at the cemetery, where members of the Communist Party and other left-wing groups brawled with representatives of Lagos’ ruling Socialist Party, throwing paint and eggs and exchanging blows with fists and sticks. The fighting forced the SP to postpone its memorial to the following day.

As night fell in Santiago and other Chilean cities, barricades went up in a number of poor neighborhoods. Gunshots were traded between the police and demonstrators, and there was scattered looting. Police detained 505 people in the capital.

Chile’s interior minister, José Miguel Insulza, arrogantly dismissed the protests as “delinquency,” echoing similar statements made under the dictatorship. He attributed the clashes to “lumpen activity.” The protests were not “political activity,” he said, since no organized political tendencies had led them.

Insulza’s statements expressed the hostility of the Socialist Party leadership to the Chilean working class and the growing ranks of poor and unemployed. First brought to power at the head of the Concertación coalition in 2000, the SP has continued the neo-liberal “free market” policies of privatization and deregulation inaugurated under the dictatorship.

Touted as a model for economic growth, these policies have only intensified social polarization in Chile, making it one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of income distribution, and leaving most workers considerably worse off

than they were 29 years ago when the coup took place.

The official unemployment rate has remained steady at approximately 10 percent, while 20 percent of the population is listed as living below the poverty line. While the richest 10 percent of Chileans monopolize 53.4 percent of the country's national income, the poorest tenth account for barely 3.7 percent.

Asked by the Santiago daily *El Mercurio* whether the violence on the September 11 anniversary may have been triggered by growing misery for the poor, Insulza responded: "These are phenomena that have been happening for some time and are not necessarily related to poverty."

The government is calling for new laws promoting "labor flexibility" as a cure for unemployment. They would allow companies to override existing regulations on working hours, using cheaper part-time labor.

Lagos used the occasion of the anniversary to make a ritualistic appeal for "reconciliation" between the torturers and the tortured. Those who took an active part in the coup and the subsequent repression, he said, "must have a moment of contrition." He then praised the armed forces for making "a definitive contribution."

This same theme was sounded in a bizarre joint television appearance by the grandson of Allende and the granddaughter of Pinochet. Maria José Pinochet conceded that her grandfather may have been "politically" responsible for human rights violations during his 17-year reign, but added that he was so busy that "some things got by him."

Gonzalo Meza Allende, for his part, echoed the current position of his grandfather's Socialist Party, praising the Pinochet dictatorship for its "successful" economic policies.

The military used the occasion to further its demand for a "full stop" amnesty, guaranteeing that no one will ever be held accountable for the assassinations, kidnappings and torture committed under the dictatorship.

In past years, military officials, right-wing groups and prominent businessmen staged ostentatious celebrations on the coup's anniversary, dubbing it "National Liberation Day." Until two years ago, it was observed as a national holiday in Chile. Recognizing that this only contributed to larger protests, the Lagos government abolished the practice.

This year, the dictatorship's supporters limited themselves to a musical concert performed by retired officers and a mass for those military personnel killed in the coup—most of them suspected Allende sympathizers murdered by the army itself.

While in the past, active-duty and retired army officers made a pilgrimage to the home of Pinochet in the wealthy Las Condes neighborhood, this year they stayed away. The 86-year-old former tyrant has played almost no public political role since his lawyers secured a ruling by Chile's Supreme Court that he is suffering from dementia and is therefore unfit to stand trial for his role in the so-called "Caravan of Death," a roving military assassination squad that murdered and "disappeared"

scores of his political opponents following the coup. The ruling effectively halted hundreds of other suits pending against the ex-dictator.

On the eve of the anniversary, Pinochet registered another judicial victory, with the decision by the Court of Appeals in Santiago rejecting an extradition request from an Argentine court investigating the car bomb assassination in Buenos Aires of former Chilean army chief Carlos Prats González and his wife, who had fled Chile after the coup.

An agent of DINA, the Chilean regime's secret police, is serving a life sentence in Argentina for the killings, while Michael Townley, a US citizen who was a DINA agent, has confessed to planting the bomb on orders from the former secret police director General Manuel Contreras. Surviving members of the Prats family have charged that as head of the ruling junta, Pinochet controlled DINA and its agents acted only on his orders.

Pinochet's CIA-backed regime was responsible for other acts of international terrorism, including the car bomb murder of Orlando Letelier and his 25-year-old American colleague Ronni Moffitt in the streets of Washington in 1976. The killings were carried out under Operation Condor, a joint operation by the secret police of six Latin American dictatorships acting with the knowledge of the CIA.

Meanwhile, the Chilean daily *La Nación* carried a report last Sunday that a sinister group known as the "Comando Conjunto" or "Joint Command," responsible for repression and atrocities under the dictatorship, had reformed for the purpose of halting judicial proceedings against the junta's assassins and torturers.

A former member of the group said that it now enjoyed the "protection" of the Chilean air force and would "carry out operations, surveillance, telephone taps, threats, theft of court papers, bribes and national and international jobs" to put a stop to human rights cases.

The report overshadowed Lagos's proclamation that, as the 29th anniversary approached, Chile was entering a "new era" in relations between the civilian government and the armed forces.



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