

# Chilean judge orders arrest of army officers who burned youths alive under Pinochet

Rafael Azul  
24 July 2015

On Tuesday, July 21, a judge in Santiago, Chile ordered the arrest of seven army officers for their participation in the burning alive of photographer Rodrigo Rojas Denegri, and student Carmen Gloria Quintana on July 2, 1986. The case is known in Chile as *Caso Quemados* (Case of the burned).

The army had detained both during the repression of an anti-government demonstration. They were severely beaten, before being soaked in gasoline and set afire. The young people, still alive, were dumped in a remote area and left to die, but were found by construction workers. Quintana survived, but Rojas died from his injuries, four days later.

The horrible crime took place during the military-fascist dictatorship of General Pinochet (1973-1989) and was part of the reign of terror against workers and youth that took place with the assistance of the US Central Intelligence Agency.

The day after the burning, a Chilean judge took testimony from both victims. At the same time, the army created a fictional story that the youths had been in possession of incendiary material that caught fire accidentally, after Quintana made a sudden move to escape. The draftee soldiers were made to rehearse the official version. This “pact” of disinformation contradicted the version of the victims and of two witnesses. In August 1986, both witnesses were abducted by the military and pressured into not testifying.

Twenty-nine years later, Fernando Guzmán, one of the draftees, broke the pact and confirmed the army’s complicity in the heinous crime. Interviewed in the Chilean TV program “*En La Mira*” (Chilevisión) Guzmán emotionally recounted the events of that day. A military patrol of 15 people, in two pickups and a truck, detained the 18- and 19-year-old victims, soaked

them in gasoline and burnt them alive. One of the pickup trucks carried army intelligence agents in civilian dress.

Guzmán reported that their commanders ordered the soldiers to beat Rojas and Quintana, under the pretext that the country was at war and they needed to be punished. The youths were placed against a wall. Rojas, badly beaten, was on the ground, Quintana managed to stand. One of the commanders soaked them with gasoline, and taunted them with a lighter; another chanted, “Burn them!”

As conscripts “we were made to punish,” declared Guzmán, “whenever we saw a group of more than two people standing in a corner, we had to break them up, to break their heads. If we refused we would be hit and our family was threatened.”

On the same program, Quintana describes what happened to her when soldiers poured gasoline on her head. She became a “human torch.”

Guzmán continued: “The really guilty one has a first and last name, Julio Castañer ... he was the one that gave the orders.” Castañer was in charge of Intelligence Section II. Guzmán, who described Castañer as a sadist, told of how people would be taken into the headquarters of Section II but would never come out. Section II men would routinely throw anti-personnel bombs at youth standing on the streets for no apparent reason, according to Guzmán, to wound them. Castañer ordered the pouring of the gasoline and set the victims on fire after taunting Quintana with a lighter.

The soldiers then wrapped the semiconscious young people in blankets, drove them north of Santiago, and left them to die. The victims were laid side by side and every conscript was made to walk over them. Fellow protesters that witnessed the burning attempted to follow the army patrol with their own vehicles but were

prevented from doing so by the military.

The incident took place during a period of national protests against the Pinochet regime. In response to increasing poverty and unemployment, and despite the savage repression, workers and young people took to the streets in “hunger marches.” This placed the regime in crisis.

The incident achieved international notoriety. It perfectly characterized the nature of a regime at war with the youth and working class. Pinochet himself had to address what happened, and claimed that they did it to themselves. Minister Francisco Javier Cuadra spoke of an international campaign to discredit the regime.

Pinochet stepped down in 1989. The dictatorship was replaced by a power-sharing pact between socialists, radicals, Christian Democrats, the Right Wing and members of the military.

Behind the scenes, the Chilean military continued to exercise considerable power. This became apparent when Quintana appealed to the new government to take up the case and bring charges against Castañer and the other officers.

In addition to Julio Castañer, charges are being brought against Nelson Medina Gálvez, Luis Zúñiga González, Jorge Astengo Espinoza, Francisco Vásquez Vergara, Iván Figueroa Canobra, and Sergio Hernández

As Castañer was being transported early in the morning this Thursday from his home in Punta Arenas to Santiago, scores of angry protesters surrounded him, calling him a murderer. Some carried gasoline containers and signs repudiating him.

The role of US imperialism in these events is yet to be established. The complicity of the CIA and Washington in Pinochet’s coup against democratically elected president Salvador Allende and the wave of barbaric repression, torture and murder that characterized his 16 years in power has been well documented.

In the early days of the dictatorship Chilean soldiers seized, tortured and murdered Charles Horman and Frank Teruggi, both US citizens in Santiago. Horman had been near the Chilean port of Valparaíso, from which US officials and the Chilean military organized the coup. Both men, journalists, had uncovered information of US complicity in the overthrow. They were taken to Santiago’s National Soccer Stadium, along with tens of thousands of political opponents of

the coup from lists compiled and provided by the CIA itself. The arrest, disappearance and murder of Horman and Teruggi is depicted in the Costa-Gravas film *Missing*.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**