

Chile's "General Never Again" arrested for Caravan of Death killings

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The former head of the Chilean Army, Juan Emilio Cheyre, has been arrested in connection with the extrajudicial executions of 15 suspected leftists in the early days of the country's 17-year-long military dictatorship, installed through the US-backed coup led by Gen. Augusto Pinochet in 1973.

The detention and likely trial of Cheyre, who has continued to occupy a significant position within Chilean ruling circles after his 2002-2006 tenure as the country's top uniformed commander, has exacerbated the political crisis gripping the government of President Michele Bachelet.

At the time the order for his arrest was announced, Cheyre was attending a meeting of the government's council of advisors on Bolivia's territorial challenge to Chile at The Hague. After his detention, he was forced to tender his resignation as one of the members of the country's electoral board.

Cheyre was tapped as the chief of the army by former President Ricardo Lagos, who in 2000 became the first Socialist Party member to occupy the La Moneda Palace since Salvador Allende was killed there in the bloody coup of September 11, 1973. Bachelet, also a member of the Socialist Party, served in Lagos' cabinet as health minister and later defense minister.

Cheyre played a prominent role in the so-called "democratic transition," earning the nickname "General Never Again" after issuing a statement in 2003 affirming that the army was undergoing "a great transformation" and that it had "committed itself to never again committing violations of human rights."

While touted by the ruling establishment along with the Socialist Party and the country's president as a triumph for "truth and reconciliation," the statement was viewed by those who had been repressed and seen their friends and families murdered under the

dictatorship as part of an attempt to bury the past and assure impunity for those in the security forces who had carried out these crimes. This impunity reached up to and including Pinochet, who died in 2006 without ever being tried for initiating Chile's nightmare of mass murder, torture and political imprisonment.

Many of these critics now see at least some vindication in the arrest of Cheyre in connection with the so-called Caravan of Death killing spree carried out by the dictatorship in the immediate aftermath of the 1973 coup.

During the period from September 30 to October 22, 1973, the "caravan" consisted of a death squad of Chilean army officers headed by Brig. Gen. Sergio Arellano Stark that traveled from the south of the country to the north aboard a Puma helicopter, going from prison to prison to ensure that suspected leftists in the military's custody throughout Chile were dealt with in a uniformly brutal fashion. They left in their wake roughly 100 victims who were brutally tortured and summarily executed.

At the time, Cheyre was a 25-year-old lieutenant and intelligence officer of the army regiment in the northern town of La Serena. After the arrival of the Caravan death squad, 15 political prisoners held there were dragged out to the base's firing range and shot to death by army troops without even the semblance of a trial. Their bodies were then taken to a local cemetery and dumped into a mass grave.

In addition to Cheyre, eight other former Chilean army personnel have been charged in relation to the deaths.

While charges that Cheyre had been complicit in the killings and torture carried out by the dictatorship in La Serena had surfaced even before he was named head of the army, his reputation suffered a serious blow in 2013

as the result of an encounter on a television news program between the ex-general and Ernesto Lejderman, the son of a couple murdered by the military in La Serena in December 1973. Cheyre was implicated in handing the then-two-year-old child over to a convent with the story that his parents had committed suicide. In the course of the broadcast, he proved unable or unwilling to answer questions posed by the son of the murdered couple and the host of the program.

Amid the controversy that ensued, Lagos, the Socialist Party ex-president, came forward to insist that it was “unjust to judge him now for something he did as a 25-year-old lieutenant.” On that basis, a major share of those responsible for the crimes of the Nazis would have to be exonerated.

In addition to former members of the security forces who have testified to Cheyre’s active participation in decisions relating to the repression of that period, several of his victims have also come forward.

Nicolas Barrantes, 17 at the time he was detained and taken to the headquarters of the army regiment in La Serena, has identified Cheyre as his torturer with “100 percent certainty.”

“In an hour and a half of interrogation and torture, life passes quickly,” he told Radio Cooperativo. “There are fractions of seconds in which I see the mouth of the interrogator, and this mouth is engraved in my memory. The voice of this person is engraved in my mind. After 43 years, I can say that it is the same person.”

He said he was tortured horribly in an attempt to force him to identify the friends and comrades of his brother Marco, who had also been detained by the regiment, and to provide the location of arsenals of weapons in the area, of which there were none.

His brother was one of those summarily shot. “He was an idealist, a good man who wanted a more just Chile,” he said. “And these criminals killed him.”

Barrantes recalled seeing Cheyre nominated as commander of the army by the Socialist Party president in 2003.

“The ground went out from under my feet when Ricardo Lagos named him commander in chief, knowing that the Vicariate of Solidarity (a human rights arm of the Chilean Catholic Church) had informed the president that this man’s hands were stained with blood ... President Lagos didn’t want to

listen.”

Lorena Pizarro, president of the Association of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared, said of Cheyre’s arrest: “He talked about reconciliation and now he is detained as an author of crimes against humanity. A violator of human rights was commander in chief of the army not under dictatorship, but under democracy.”

She described him as the “symbol of impunity,” an impunity that continues to exist in Chile.

Meanwhile, the present commander in chief of the army, Gen. Humberto Oviedo, responded to Cheyre’s arrest by declaring it “a concern for the institution,” adding, “we are confident in the presumption of innocence.”



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