

Religious Condemn Suppression in Chile

By Religious News Service

Revelations in the U.S. Congress about the "destabilizing" activities of the CIA prior to the September 1973 overthrow of the government of President Salvador Allende in Chile have caused elements within the international religious community to re-focus attention on the human rights situation there.

While some religious spokesmen, both within and outside Chile, have defended the authoritarian rule of the military junta which accomplished the coup, the weight of religious reaction has become highly critical of the junta. Torture and ill-treatment of political prisoners — estimated at about 8,000 by government figures — are charges most often heard.

In Chile itself, rising inflation and a worsening economic situation have overshadowed the fact that since seizing power over a year ago the junta has dissolved Congress, banned political party activity, taken control of the press, usurped many of the powers of the courts and for the most part, has suppressed individual human rights.

Yet some observers insist that the majority of Chileans are strongly in favor of the military regime and that there remains a good deal of freedom with respect to religion, ownership and cultural pursuits.

But with the disclosures on CIA interventions, the anti-junta positions of religious groups around the world, particularly with respect to denial of human rights, have solidified.

In a strong reaction to reported abuses of individual freedoms in Chile (along with Brazil, the Philippines and South Korea), the National Council of Churches governing board urged the U.S. government to suspend military and economic aid to the military government headed by Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

In addition, a letter was sent to President Gerald Ford by 16 Protestant and Roman Catholic mission-related agencies, condemning the reported CIA interventions in Chile as "immoral and indefensible." It referred to the Chilean junta as an "undemocratic" government which tramples on the rights of its own people.

Anglican Archbishop Michael Ramsey of Canterbury, on a recent visit to Chile, expressed "great concern" for human rights in Chile, declaring that there is "certainly some ruthlessness" in that Latin American nation today.

A group of 500 Colombian Catholics priests, in a statement criticizing the Latin American bishops' working paper prepared for the Synod in Rome, made specific reference to the current Chilean situation as an example of individual human rights. They cited an earlier condemnation by the U.S. bishops of what they called "the crimes of military in Chile."

Even prior to the CIA disclosures which stirred up a new hornet's nest of protests and recriminations, the tide of criticism had begun to turn against the ruling four-man military government headed by Gen. Pinochet.

The World Council of Churches, the International Commission of Jurists, the interreligious Committee of Cooperation for Peace in Chile and the Catholic Bishops of Chile issued statements denouncing the junta for keeping thousands of political prisoners in jail, using torture to gain information, and for "creating a climate of insecurity and fear" in the country.

As far back in the history of the coup as October 1973, a group of Canadian Anglican, Catholic, United Church leaders and others warned their government to "delay" recognition of the new regime until assurances were made that those detained by the military would be safely released.

At the same time, the Chilean Catholic bishops, while proclaiming qualified support for the junta, expressed growing concern over "certain actions" taken by the military since the Sept. 11 coup. They were said to be alarmed over the repression unleashed against Allende supporters and set up an office to look into alleged abuses of human rights and acts of violence.

The Chilean bishops, according to the Vatican City newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, had called for "moderation toward the vanquished," the exclusion of "reprisals" and had urged all Chileans to keep in mind the "sincere idealism" which inspired many of the Allende supporters.

Yet, three months later, a Canadian priest who visited Chile at the request of the Canadian Council of Churches and the Canadian Catholic Conference, reported that the situation in Chile is "a quiet reign of terror." He described to Canadian External Affairs Minister Mitchell Sharp "a widespread and systematic repression of human rights."

At about the same time, it should be noted, the Catholic vicar of Chile's armed forces, Bishop Francisco Xavier Gillmore Stock, declared that the military coup which overthrew the Marxist President Allende "is the best thing that could have happened to my country."

He said violence and "executions in the street" never reached the proportions reported in the world press. "All those things which have been said (about the coup and its aftermath) are lies," he declared. "It is false that there are thousands in jail and it is false that the coup was supported by foreign powers."

A month later, however, (January 1973) the U.S. Catholic bishops urged the U.S. government to withhold "financial aid and military assistance" from Chile until that nation demonstrates that "human and civil rights have been restored." Acting on a recommendation of its Social Development and World Peace Committee, the U.S. Catholic Conference's Administrative Board said:

"We are deeply distressed by the violation of human rights taking place in Chile. We associate ourselves in solidarity with the Church in Chile during these troubled times."

In April, three Chilean religious leaders, Catholic Auxiliary Bishop Fernando Aniztia Ruiz of Santiago, Lutheran Bishop Helmut Frenz and High Rabbi Angel Kreiman of Chile, made a plea for the release of political prisoners who had not been heard from in six months. They claimed that 6,000 prisoners were being held without charges.

At about the same time, Pope Paul, in receiving the credentials of the new Chilean ambassador to the Vatican, called for "peace and brotherhood" in Chile, and appealed for an end to "revenge and recriminations" there. The pontiff urged recognition "for the fundamental rights of every person" in Chile as an "indispensable condition" for true social progress.

It was shortly after the Pope's appeal that the Catholic Primate of Chile, Cardinal Raul Silva Henriquez of Santiago, issued a statement in behalf of the "majority" of the Chilean hierarchy that was critical of the ruling junta.

"We do not doubt the righteous intention nor the goodwill of our governors, it said. "But, as pastors, we see objective obstacles to reconciliation among Chileans." The statement added that Chileans are living in "a climate of insecurity and fear," wage earners are bearing "an excessive burden," the educational system is "without proper participation by parents and the academic community," and there is "a lack of effective legal safeguards for personal security."

Last May, the leading Mexico City daily, Excelsior, disclosed that the interreligious Committee of Cooperation for Peace in Chile

had compiled dossiers on hundreds of cases of torture of political prisoners in Chile. Similarly, in Geneva, a report by a three-man mission of the International Commission of Jurists said that political prisoners in Chile were subjected to "various forms of ill-treatment, sometimes amounting to severe torture."

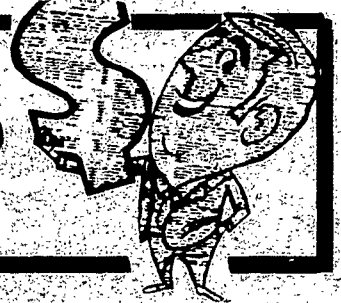
At the same time, a series of reports by The Wanderer, a conservative U.S. Catholic newspaper in St. Paul, Minn., claimed that the military government in Chile is an "enormously popular government." The series, written by a staff correspondent who visited Chile, also claimed that U.S. press reports had exaggerated the

antagonism of Chileans against the junta.

The Wanderer report was challenged by Father Frederick McGuire, who heads the USCC's Latin American Division and who authored the earlier U.S. Bishops' statement condemning the junta for suppression of human rights.

With the current controversy over U.S. political and economic intervention in Chile, spurred by testimony relating to the CIA, pressure is mounting not only within the religious communities but within the United Nations and governmental agencies to take a closer look at the Chilean situation and if necessary issue some form of sanctions against the government.

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