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Disclosures in 'Caravan of Death'

Chileans anguished to learn fate of those missing from Pinochet era

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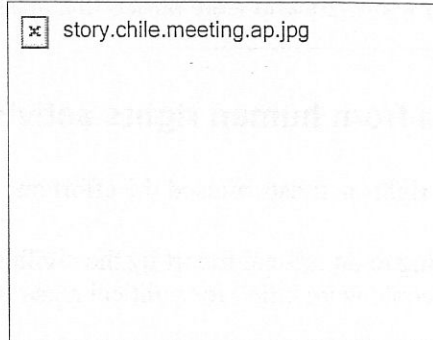
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Chile's Chief Justice Hernan Alvarez talks with Viviana Diaz, center, and Mireya Garcia, left, leaders of an organization of relatives of dissidents who disappeared under the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet

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SANTIAGO, Chile -- Viviana Diaz had wondered for years about the fate of her father -- one of more than 1,000 Chileans who disappeared under the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

She and other relatives of those who vanished dedicated their lives to learning what happened.

Now, Diaz and other relatives are reacting with anger, anguish and doubt to an official disclosure that scores were killed and dumped into the sea.

President Ricardo Lagos addressed the nation Sunday evening and confirmed that an investigation had found at least 151 dissidents were assassinated by Pinochet's security forces and thrown into rivers, lakes or the Pacific Ocean. Among them was Diaz's father, Victor, a communist leader.

"All I've wanted, all these years, was to find the remains of my father and be able to bury them," Diaz said Monday. "Now, I am told that I will never be able to do so."

Killed for 'thinking differently'

Still, Diaz was encouraged by the official disclosure.

"What is really important is that the army has, for the first time, admitted that it killed 200 Chileans just because they thought differently."

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Lagos also praised the military for admitting the killings, saying "it shares the pain that those acts provoked."

The new information is the product of a six-month investigation by human rights activists, religious officials and the army. Former President Eduardo Frei called on all three groups to work together to find answers to what happened to dissidents who disappeared after Pinochet's 1973 coup.

The armed forces conducted a quiet internal investigation while religious groups gathered information privately -- sometimes from former agents who preferred to reveal their old secrets to priests instead of military officials.

Lagos said the work yielded information on 200 people -- 151 who were thrown into the ocean, rivers or lakes, 20 who were buried in a mass grave yet to be found and 29 who are scattered in graves around central Chile.

Praise from human rights activists

Human rights activists praised the effort but stressed the need for more information.

According to an official report by the civilian government that succeeded Pinochet in 1990, at least 3,200 people were killed for political reasons and another 1,197 disappeared.

Some relatives expressed skepticism about the report. Gladys Marin, president of the Communist Party, whose husband Jorge Munoz was among those killed, dismissed the information as "a mockery, impossible to believe."

Lawyer Carmen Hertz said she did not believe her husband, journalist Carlos Berger, was thrown into the sea.

"This looks like an intelligence operation by the army to divert ongoing investigations by the courts," Hertz said.

But Pamela Pereira, a prominent human rights lawyer who sat on the 1999 commission, had no doubts about the report, which found her father, Andres Pereira, was thrown into the sea the same day he was arrested -- October 6, 1973. She insisted, however, that the police are still withholding details about missing people.

"Look me in the eyes and tell me that there is no more information," she told reporters, challenging the head of the police.

'Who do I believe?'

Nelson Donato, a member of Families of the Detained/Disappeared, said he was confused after the military's report revealed that his father was thrown into the ocean. Judge Juan Guzman's investigation had found that Donato's father was cremated in Santiago.

"Two deaths for one person. Who do I believe?" Donato asked.

For Diaz, whose father was arrested in May 1976 and killed six months later, knowing his remains are resting at the bottom of the Pacific was not nearly enough.

"I need to know exactly what happened, how were his final hours," she said. "Who made the

decision to kill him, how was he taken to the sea and exactly where?"

Pinochet, 85, was indicted last month on homicide and kidnapping charges related to the so-called "Caravan of Death" that left 75 political prisoners dead. The Chile Supreme Court dropped the charges because Guzman did not question Pinochet first.

Guzman, who is pursuing a second indictment, agreed to reschedule medical tests of Pinochet for Thursday and Friday, and a legal interrogation for January 15. Pinochet's legal team accepted the new dates.

Pinochet failed to show up Sunday and Monday for psychological tests that Guzman had ordered to see if he is mentally fit to stand trial. The judge is leading a probe into more than 200 cases of Pinochet-era human rights abuses.

But dropping his earlier opposition, Pinochet agreed Tuesday to undergo medical tests and questioning by the judge.

The Associated Press & Reuters contributed to this report.

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