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WORLD

EXPLORING

Latin America

'Senator for Life' Pinochet



BY REUTERS

Chileans protested at the presidential palace in Santiago as General Augusto Pinochet met inside with President Eduardo Frei. The demonstrators' signs read, 'He who doesn't believe in democracy can't practice it.'

Chile's ex-dictator leaving military for new post

By Cori Howard
Chronicle Foreign Service

Santiago, Chile

The ghosts of Chile's past are sleepwalking, disturbed from fitful slumber by the approach of an event arranged long ago by the man now known as the "dinosaur" of Latin American dictators.

Tomorrow, General Augusto Pinochet, who has created misery and despair for some Chileans and wealth and stability for others, takes the next step in his quest for political immortality.

The 82-year-old leaves behind his post as chief of the armed forces and becomes "senator for life" — a designation he engineered for himself through his 1980 redesign of the constitution. The document also created space for nine other nonelected senators and prevents the government from firing even junior military commanders.

Pinochet will take his seat beside officials he once blacklisted after he took power in a violent coup that turned into a 17-year dictatorship and left at least 3,200 people dead or missing.

One of those officials is Congresswoman Isabel Allende, the daughter of Salvador Allende, the Marxist president who committed suicide rather than surrender to Pinochet during the 1973 coup. She said recently of Pinochet's new post, "He will have to hear face to face things he has not heard so far."

Ascanillo Cavallo, chief editor of *Revista Hoy*, Chile's only surviving left-leaning maga-

TAKING THE GENERAL TO COURT

As the day of General Augusto Pinochet's retirement from the armed forces approaches, Chileans who believe he has evaded responsibility for the deaths or disappearances of at least 3,200 people during his rule are pressing for justice.

The Communist Party has filed two lawsuits accusing Pinochet of genocide and illegal appropriation of property. And last week, relatives of dissidents who disappeared also sued the former dictator, accusing him of kidnapping, torture and homicide.

The legal actions' prospects for success are considered dim because most of the abuses that occurred under Pinochet are covered by an amnesty law he issued in 1978. Pinochet himself vehemently denies any involvement in crimes committed while he was in power.

A Spanish judge is also investigating Pinochet for the disappearance of Spanish citizens under military rule, but



General Augusto Pinochet's regime left at least 3,200 dead or missing

Chile's government refuses to recognize the court's jurisdiction.

Legislators from the ruling Concertacion coalition are trying to block Pinochet's entrance to the Senate later this week, saying he is ineligible because he seized power in a coup and was never elected. Another group of pro-government legislators has announced plans to open impeachment procedures against Pinochet as soon as he is sworn in to the upper house.

Both attempts are likely to fail because the right-wing opposition holds a majority in the Senate.

zine, says of Pinochet's new status: "He is only one senator out of 48. It's not really important. But it's very symbolic and harder to accept in a democratic institution."

Pinochet remains popular, however, and Cavallo admits that if the general had been on the ballot for the last presidential elections, he would have won.

That is a testament to the fact that under open-market policies instituted by Pinochet, the economy has registered sustained growth and virtually no inflation for well over a decade. Chile has posted average gross domestic product growth of 8.1 percent in the past eight years, and the jobless rate is a modest 5.7 percent.

But those seeking a more

complete democracy for Chile worry that with Pinochet in the Senate, buttressed by the presence of four other military appointees and a right-wing majority, any chances of scrapping the appointed Senate seats are doomed, as are the chances of passing laws permitting divorce and elemental worker protections and raising corporate taxes. It also means that no challenges to Pinochet's constitution will be possible.

Gladys Marin, president of the Communist Party, knows just how the army can use its power.

Last year, six years after "transitional democracy" was returned to Chile, she was arrested by 20 plainclothes police officers and jailed for five days. Her crime was calling Pinochet a "blackmailer and psychopath" at a memorial service for the thousands, including her husband, who were killed or disappeared during his rule.

Marin was sued under a security law drafted during the dictatorship that bans defaming elected officials, the military, judiciary or police. Public pressure led to the charges being dropped, but the law is still on the books.

Today, Marin is spearheading the first criminal case against Pinochet for crimes committed during his regime. Since she began in January, two more cases have been brought forward.

"People weren't aware that there was no democracy in Chile," she said. "Now with the controversy over Pinochet in the

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Senate, people are waking up to the need for real democracy, for labor laws, divorce laws."

The career change for a man who also banned political parties, shut down Congress and implemented a nightly curfew that lasted more than a decade strikes many Chileans as either embarrassing or farcical.

A lawyer at an upscale Santiago cafe, in an area supposedly rife with Pinochet supporters, said: "Pinochet gave people cellular phones and credit cards to make people feel he was good, that he could provide economic success. But most people here have few opportunities and terrible salaries. For years, they've made serious sacrifices, but they're not living any better."

The Pinochet years and the timid "transitional" governments headed by presidents Patricio Aylwin and now Eduardo Frei have left Chileans disenchanted with politics. In the December legisla-

tive elections, more than 40 percent of eligible voters either defaced their ballots, chose no candidates or did not bother to vote.

"The average person sees Pinochet as something that perturbs their life, that will reopen the wounds of the past," said Marin. "And they don't want to disturb the quiet waters."

At a February concert by the Irish rock group U2, singer Bono invited Sola Sierra, leader of the Group of Families of the Detained and Disappeared, to speak on stage. Half the audience erupted into applause and the other half into booing. Afterward, the disgruntled complained that they paid a lot of money for a concert, not a political event.

For Ana Gonzalez, however, separating the political from the personal is impossible.

Her politically leftist husband, two sons and daughter-in-law disappeared in 1976. Friends later told her they had seen them being beaten at a military checkpoint and thrown into a van. That is all

she knows. For two decades, the military has denied that they were ever detained.

"The worst thing happening here in Chile right now is that there's still no justice," said Gonzalez, who was a key figure for years in the group headed by Sierra.

She views herself as an apt metaphor for the country's present state: "On the outside, I'm OK. I'm doing well. But on the inside, I'm in pain. It's very superficial."

That fragile state of living with contradictions has been the legacy of Pinochet's rule. Today, Chile is two countries — divided between those who oppose Pinochet and those who support him, between the poor and the rich.

Despite the low jobless rate, the average worker's monthly salary is \$500 — in a nation where the cost of living approaches that of the United States. Tomas Moulian, author of the recent book "Chile: Anatomy of a Myth," says 3.6 million of Chile's 14 million people live on less than \$300 a month.

Carmen Silva, a well-known

painter, sees the extremes in her neighborhood. One side of the main street that runs through it belongs to Las Condes, a ritzy Beverly Hills-like area, and the other side to the poor Recoleta area. "When something happens on the poor side, the police from the rich side don't come to help," she said.

"The economic policies begun by Pinochet have increased business with other countries and made Chile rich, but the money doesn't filter down to the people," she added. "The new riches of Chile stay with the elite."

But staunch defenders of Pinochet's economic policies are also easily found.

"North American business wouldn't be operating in Chile if not for Pinochet," said Hermes Lopez, public relations officer for the armed forces. "Twenty-five years ago, we were a very poor country. We didn't export one grape, and now we're renowned for our fruit, wood, fish. Pinochet created elephants in the desert."