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Chile Seeks to Find People Disappeared During Military Dictatorship; Government launches plan to locate the remains of hundreds killed decades ago

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By Ryan Dubé and Patricia Garip

Chile's leftist government launched a national search plan to find the remains of hundreds of people who were killed and disappeared decades ago by the military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

Days before Chile marks the 50th anniversary of the violent coup that brought Pinochet to power, President Gabriel Boric signed a decree that officials say will increase state resources to find the whereabouts of more than 1,100 people after they were taken into custody by the military regime.

"They were subjected to this extreme and brutal form of violence," Boric said at a ceremony in capital Santiago that was attended by victims' relatives, who carried photos of their loved ones.

"Justice has taken too long," he said. "The state has to be responsible for finding the truth."

In Latin America, the disappeared, or *desaparecidos*, became a chilling part of the region's vocabulary during the Cold War, when security forces kidnapped, killed and disposed of the bodies of tens of thousands of leftist guerrillas, activists and unionized workers as well as academics and college students. At least 10,000 people vanished under Argentina's military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983, according to estimates conducted by the government after Argentina returned to democracy. Many of the disappeared were kidnapped and tortured in clandestine detention centers.

In Chile, 1,469 people went missing under Pinochet's rule. So far, the remains of 307 people have been found, according to the government. Thousands more were imprisoned and tortured after Pinochet took power in a coup on Sept. 11, 1973, that ousted then-President Salvador Allende, a Marxist whose 1970 election and subsequent expropriation of key industries turned Chile into a Cold War battleground.

As with military rulers elsewhere in South America, Chile's dictatorship aimed to eradicate Marxist guerrillas, members of left-wing political parties and other opponents of the regime.

Since Chile's return to democracy in 1990, human-rights groups and families of victims say that successive, mostly leftist Chilean governments have failed to bring justice despite launching truth commissions that exposed rights abuses. They accuse the military, which didn't participate in Wednesday's event, of covering up abuses.

On Monday, the Supreme Court sentenced several former military officials to 25 years in prison for the kidnapping and murder of folk singer Víctor Jara. One of the officials, an 86-year-old retired brigadier, shot and killed himself on Tuesday when police went to his apartment in Santiago to escort him to prison.

Prosecutors have successfully tried a third of cases involving killings and disappearances during Pinochet's rule, and a fraction of the 38,000 cases involving torture, said Rodrigo Bustos, director of Amnesty International in Chile.

"There is still a lot of impunity," he said.

Rosa Merino's brother, Pedro, disappeared in 1974 in the southern city of Coronel when he was 20. He was then leading a young Communists group. Merino said she is hopeful that the government's plan will uncover what happened to Pedro.

"We've been living on the hope of being able to see each other again," Merino, 63 years old, said. "The struggle is with the criminals, who don't want to say where the people are."

About a third of the people who disappeared are believed to have been dropped by the military into the icy Pacific Ocean from helicopters after being tied up in sacks weighed down with metal rail lines, said Peter Kornbluh, director of the Chile project at the National Security Archive at George Washington University who has written extensively on the Pinochet regime.

"Some of them weren't even dead yet," he said.

The remains of others were buried in secret graves. Concerned that the graves could be found, the military later sent teams to excavate and burn the bodies in some of them.

Kornbluh said finding the remains of the disappeared would be difficult, as only the military and a now-defunct intelligence agency really know what happened.

The search is expected to entail the digitization of disparate physical records and the application of artificial intelligence to connect dots and close some cases, officials say. Rights advocates say the plan will also include more resources for forensic work. But the details have yet to be divulged, according to a lawyer representing a group of victims' families.

"This is the first time the Chilean state commits to an exhaustive search," said Amelia Negron, 70, a former member of the MIR subversive group who was imprisoned for two years in the 1970s. "First-person memory is fading, so it is our obligation to sow the seeds of memory so it endures."

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Credit: By Ryan Dubé and Patricia Garip