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Chile



Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

10 September 1980

Dear Michael,

to: [Handwritten initials]

Prime Minister

(2)

[Handwritten initials] 11/5

You asked for a note on human rights in Chile following Mr Ridley's comment during a TV interview that the situation in Chile had deteriorated in the last six weeks. Following two years of what was generally acknowledged to be an overall improvement in the situation in Chile, albeit with occasional backward steps, the assassination of a senior intelligence officer on 15 July has provoked a strong reaction from the authorities. The announcement in August of a plebiscite on a new constitution (to be held on 11 September) has also led to greater political agitation in Chile.

The attached note offers a general perspective of the situation in Chile since 1974 and puts these recent developments into context.

We have consistently taken the line that Chile's human rights record is bad but that it is now no worse than in many other countries (see para 3 of the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary's note to the Prime Minister of 14 April). This remains so. It is certainly better than in 1974.

You asked also whether OD should not have been appraised of these latest developments. They were not, as you can see, exceptional

/in

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in Chilean terms. It is also the case that the scale of the security measures taken by the Chileans in late July/August became apparent only after the announcement of the lifting of the arms embargo had been made on 22 July. The reasons for doing so set out by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary in April remained valid.

While there has been a deterioration in the human rights situation in Chile in recent weeks, it does of course suit the lobby - particularly in view of the plebiscite in Chile on 11 September - to make full use of it.

*Yours ever,
M.A.W.*

M A Wickstead

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HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHILE ms

BACKGROUND

The period after the military coup in September 1973 and the assassination of President Allende was marked by extensive abuses of human rights. Hundreds of disappeared, thousands fled abroad and the intelligence services resorted to widespread torture. In recent years, the situation has improved (although the UN Special Rapporteur reported in late 1979 that improvements had not been maintained in all areas). There are few political prisoners, some exiles have been allowed to return, arbitrary acts outside the law by security services decreased and judicial enquiries were instituted into the cases of missing persons. By 1979, the regime was showing tentative interest in evolving a return to some democratic rights with the preparation of a draft constitution and labour legislation. They also appeared increasingly conscious of the need to improve their international image. But human rights in the widest sense were still severely restricted, intimidation of opponents continued and the regime retained extensive repressive powers under the "State of Emergency" which it can invoke at will. The plebiscite on 11 September on a new constitution in reality offers little choice and seems likely to confirm President Pinochet in power for at least a decade. It has also (since its announcement on 11 August) led to a rise in the political temperature in Chile.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

The murder on 15 July of Colonel Vergara, the Director of the Chilean Army's School of Intelligence, led to firm counter-measures from the authorities in search of the culprits. There were massive searches and over 300 arrests (many temporary, including that of Miss Claire Wilson). The authorities extended from 5 to 20 days, the period during which suspects could be held before being handed over to the courts.



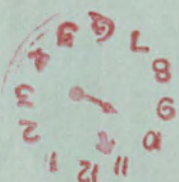
Between 23 July and the end of August, there were also several cases of kidnap by a far right group called COVEMA. Although all victims were subsequently released, torture appears to have been used and one died subsequently of injuries received during his detention. COVEMA was subsequently discovered to have been operating within the State Security Organisation (CNI): as a result, several CNI officers were arrested. This was the first time since the coup that the regime had admitted gross violations of the law by officials within one of its own security organisations and exposed those responsible.

/ This does not however mean that there has been any weakening in the regime's determination to act firmly against suspected terrorists; and Chilean police methods are notoriously severe. We do not however have evidence to confirm claims by such as Amnesty International that there has been widespread and systematic torture of those detained.

There are press reports of some 40 arrests as a result of demonstrations concerning the forthcoming plebiscite on Chile's new constitution. Here, too, there are claims that torture has been used.

British and Commonwealth Office

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