

Viewpoint

Chilean resistance still active

The church was packed. Perhaps 600 people gathered together to support a hunger strike by about 30. Bishops and parish priests spoke of love and peace, but also of land, hunger, unemployment and repression. They echoed the strikers' call for information about the hundreds of "disappeared" people plucked out of their homes and off the streets by Chile's police and military.

An announcement: a court had ordered the return to their relatives of 14 bodies found in a lime grave near Santiago. The "Lonquen victims" families had won a small victory over the state.

Suddenly the church erupted with emotion. People embraced one another, many wept with joy and the crowd filed out in high spirits. On the disappeared there was no news. But for a Canadian visitor to Chile a year ago, the message was clear: the Chilean people's resistance to the dictatorship is active and broad.

The message came through several times that September, the month when independence from Spain is celebrated, and since September 11, 1973, a time for mourning the military coup that ended the left-leaning government of Popular Unity. From the highest Catholic church levels to underground armed groups, the resistance was stirring.

You could see why. In Santiago life seemed comfortable only in a few posh suburbs. The downtown business core teemed with activity, but much of it was street peddlars selling ties, candy, lottery tickets and anything else to make a few pesos. Free education had been severely cut back; medicine now served only those who could pay for it; lawyers the government didn't like couldn't get fair hearings or clients. The teachers, doctors and lawyers were among those peddling peanuts on the subway or laboring on large farms.

The tourist can see the wealth promised in travel

posters. The snow-capped mountains, multi-hued desert, fertile valleys and ocean views are spectacular. The fish is delicious, the wines (forbidden fruit outside Chile, boycotted with every other export) full-bodied. The people are hospitable, the cities well-developed and cultured.

But the tourist can also see the public money beautifying commercial streets while families crowd decaying buildings. A few people ride expensive cars, many jam into rickety busses. The public train system is grubby and declining while private companies thrive. At one of the world's largest and most modern copper mines, Chuquicamata in the north, workers ask about emigrating to Canada despite living standards above the Chilean average.

Although most people avoid discussing politics, there is more debate and opposition than a tourist expects. Even the pro-government daily *El Mercurio* occasionally criticizes a judicial decision.

And the pro-Christian Democrat weekly newsmagazine *Hoy* (Today) carries on a feisty quest for democracy and reform, despite being closed at times.

The most visible opposition comes from the church, and the most visible issue is human rights. Under the wing of Cardinal Raul Silva Henriquez, lawyers in the special Vicariate of Solidarity try to prick the regime about the disappeared. The church sponsored committees of families of the disappeared and recently, in line with "the shepherd calling his flock," had formed committees to fight for exiles' unconditional right to return. The church's commitment to social progress was expressed by constant criticism from the pulpit and works such as soup kitchens. And it sponsors two of the most critical media published in Chile, the Vicariate's fortnightly *Solidaridad* (sold only in churches) and the Jesuit monthly *Mensaje*.

The church came close to confrontation on September 18, Independence Day. After consultations throughout the church, Cardinal Silva decided to openly criticize President Augusto Pinochet at the mass which Chile's leader traditionally attends. However, Pinochet got wind of the plan and, I was told, informed Silva that an open attack would spark a government walkout and complete rupture with the church. As the church's ability to aid the oppressed was already under pressure, Silva backed down at the last moment. But he had the junta worried: the usual radio broadcast of the service was cut off, and cabinet ministers arrived at the cathedral without their families in case something broke out.

Working with the church for democracy and reform were the Socialist-Communist coalition Popular Unity (which governed from 1970-73) and centrist Christian Democrats (who originally supported Pinochet's coup). The first public speech by former C.D. president Eduardo Frei (1964-70)—who calls for change but not "another Nicaragua"—was widely reported but banned from being reprinted.

Similarly, a group of 24 intellectuals trying to take advantage of the government's claim to want public discussion of a proposed constitution was prohibited from having a public meeting.

The junta, was responding to such internal and external pressures with better public relations, such as the announced return (later frustrated) of the Lonquen victims' bodies. An investigating judge went so far as to indict eight policemen and secret service agents for the murder by torture of an alleged revolutionary. At the end of September the Supreme Court issued a long explanation of its much-delayed refusal to ex-

tradite three government agents, who were wanted by the United States for ordering the 1976 death in Washington of former Chilean foreign affairs minister Orlando Letelier.

El Mercurio reports in detail on Chile's international image, gloating over new foreign investment and Britains' re-establishment of diplomatic relations. A large building was being constructed for the new embassy of China (not Taiwan). The Canadian embassy is in the middle of the business district.

The survey also discovered that over 80 per cent of the students disapproved of council's handling of the affair.

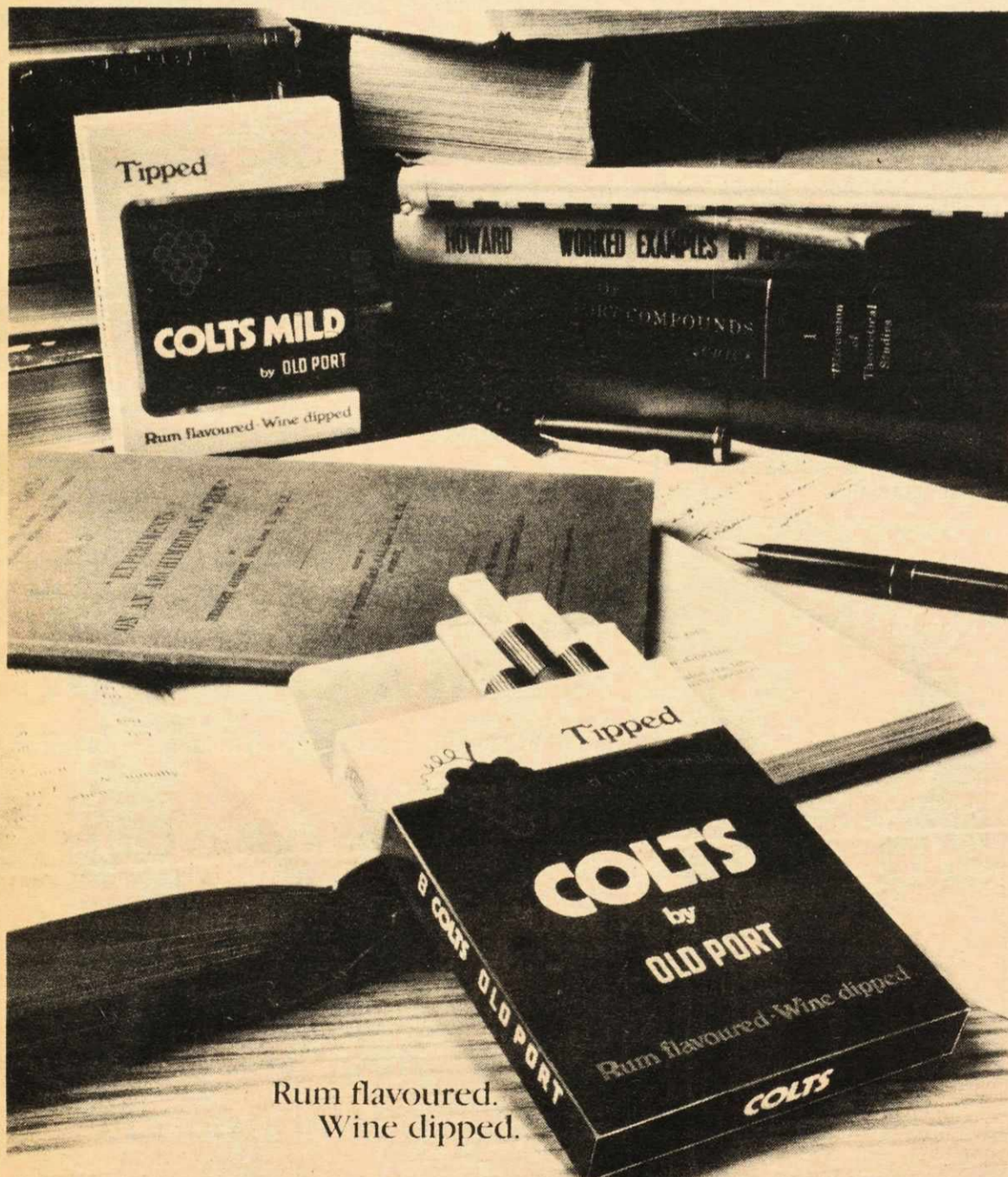
Other moves by the junta that September, included a planned mass spectacle to celebrate the "new institutionality" of military government. Ironically, it was rained out several times. And soccer was played in the National Stadium for the first time since its infamous use as a concentration camp after the coup.

But people remember on September 11. A large rally marked the six years of repression. At a small service in the municipal cemetery, Letelier relatives attended the graves of family members and a Popular Unity cabinet minister. Further back with the common people, the graves of folk singer Victor Jara (tortured to death at the National Stadium) and Communist poet Pablo Neruda (dead of a heart attack shortly after the coup) were covered with flowers. (Only in the cemetery was I aware of being followed.) Later in the month the German Chilean Cultural center was packed at a tribute to Neruda.

Underground, things are happening too. A new social democratic party was being formed by left Christian Democrats, radicals and others, *El Rebelde*, the news bulletin of the MIR (Revolutionary Left Movement), clandestinely organized neighborhood committees, labor militance and armed struggle. It eschews merely a return to formal democracy, seeing that as an invitation to more military takeovers. MIR leaders were reported all back in Chile, and other radical groups were also organizing.

Even in Penas (folk clubs), were songs about love and freedom barely conceal their real content, the message is: *Venceremos*—we shall overcome.

(Winnipeg freelance writer Eric Mills travelled in Latin America for 11 months in 1978-79. This is an account of four weeks in Chile, mostly in the capital of Santiago.)



Rum flavoured.
Wine dipped.

Crack a pack of Colts along with the books.