

Two Years Later

by Peggy Matthews

The 11th of September marks the second anniversary of the coup d'etat in Chile which overthrew Allende's constitutionally elected government in favour of a military regime, under the self-declared presidency of General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte.

September is an important month in Chile. September 18th is Independence Day, and the principal national holiday, and September 19th is Army day, traditionally marked by parades. This year's display will be one of the most spectacular in Chile's history. They have added very considerably to their weaponry and manpower in the last two years.

For the man in the street these have been years of great hardship. Purchasing power has been reduced by 60%, and unemployment is currently estimated at between 25-30%; in the shantytown districts around Santiago as high as 70%. Many families are starving. It is particularly hard for the families of political prisoners. Many children have lost both parents. Some are in prison, other have disappeared, presumed dead.

Today there are believed to be between 5,000 to 7,000 political prisoners, few of whom have been brought to trial. Although some have been released over the past nine months, new arrests have meant that the total number of prisoners has not declined. It has been estimated that 95,000 Chilean citizens have been arrested, one in every hundred of the population. Nobody knows how many have been killed. The figure could run as high as 40,000.

Amnesty International now has the names of over 1,000 Chilean

citizens who have disappeared since the coup. The relatives of many of these people were witnesses to their arrest by Chilean intelligence services (D.I.N.A.) but enquiries as to their whereabouts, after arrest, met with little or no response.

Torture has become common practice. Most people who have been arrested for political reasons are subjected to torture, either to elicit information or simply as a punishment. The most common method of torture is the application of electric currents to sensitive parts of the body. Others being

made to stand blindfold for very long periods (up to several days), severe beatings, sleep deprivation and isolation. Amnesty has been told of torture being inflicted on a person in front of other members of his/her family, including very young children.

The Committee for Peace (Comite de Cooperacion para La Paz en Chile) an ecumenical body, was established after the coup to assist families of political prisoners and also, through its legal department, to provide defence lawyers and legal aid for prisoners who could not afford the fees. The Committee

has also established workshops in the poor areas of Santiago and other towns for the unemployed, and for families of political prisoners. Released political detainees find it extremely difficult to find employment because of their arrest.

For most long term political prisoners the only way to obtain release from prison is to get a visa and a work contract abroad. Amnesty Groups with adopted Chilean prisoners have had to go along with the arbitrary expulsion of their adoptees. Up to the present hundreds of Chileans have been expelled from their country, many of whom has no charge brought against them. The Halifax group adopted such a prisoner. Arrested in September 1973 this 26 year old Chilean was imprisoned in Arica prison, in northern Chile, without charges. Last July 19 he and ten other prisoners appeared before the Military Tribunal. The Tribunal had before them the letters written on his behalf, including an enquiry from the Canadian government and a work contract. He was released. Today he is safely re-united with his wife in England. She herself was arrested and tortured before finding asylum in the British embassy.

People continue to "disappear" in Chile today. Amnesty has received countless testimonies from families or friends of these persons relating in detail the circumstances of the arrest. Frequent reports are received from released prisoners that they have seen these disappeared people in torture and detention centers. People who "disappear" for a few weeks are not included in A.I. list of missing persons. It is known that people have been found by their relatives after very long periods of disappearance in detention centres. In recent months there have been several cases of leftwing Chilean refugees in Argentina being arrested and returned to Chile where they have been immediately imprisoned or have "disappeared".

General Pinochet has claimed that "Marxists" are kidnapping their own comrades, and taking them to Argentina to train as guerrillas - all this without the knowledge and consent of their families.

World concern resulted in the United Nations Human Rights Commission being requested to investigate allegations of torture and other violations of human rights in Chile. The Military Junta refused them entry to the country.

There are approximately 20,000 Chilean refugees in Argentina today, many of whom live in appalling conditions and have no work. A large number of them have crossed into Argentina illegally to escape political persecution in Chile. They now find themselves in a hopeless situation and are desperately seeking the help of international organizations such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the I.C.E.M. to help them find asylum in another country.



Helpline goes legal

Do legal rights go unexercised because people are not aware they have them? Is the Canadian Legal system subject to unwarranted criticism because it is uninformed criticism? The answer to both questions is most certainly yes. What we know is that so long as people are uninformed or misinformed about laws and legal procedure in this country our potential for achieving the 'just society' will be thereby diminished. What we do not know is the extent to which the public is ignorant of their legal rights or of the unsuccessful efforts made to correct this state of ignorance.

Government departments, both provincial and federal, and private agencies right across Canada are engaging in a wide variety of programs designed to bring information about the legal system and its operations to ordinary people. These programmes may involve the preparation and distribution of pamphlets and materials about laws: housing laws, welfare laws, income tax laws, laws in any number of specific areas; public lectures, television and radio shows, are also used.

Increasingly we are paying attention to preventive law, which is designed to avoid legal problems by providing legal information before, rather than after, the problem arises. Preventive law is being encouraged not just for the wealthy or corporate citizens but for everybody, and particularly for the poor

who face a morass of legislation, regulation, and bureaucracy in their day to day lives.

As part of this movement toward preventive law, HELPLINE has now added to its services a 24-hour source of legal information. Callers to the HELPLINE number, 422-7444 will be able to obtain from the HELPLINE operators basic information about the legal system. The HELPLINE operators, all volunteers, have for some time been available around the clock to provide information, counselling and a referral service for drug, alcohol, crisis or personal problems. They are now also equipped to either give callers basic legal information or to guide the caller to the appropriate source, be it the court, the police, legal aid, a private lawyer or otherwise.

The operators have completed a training course given by two third year law students from Dalhousie Law School, John McLean and Dave Fredricksen. A legal information manual was prepared for use by the operators during the training sessions and throughout the duration of the programme. The HELPLINE operators have been instructed about court locations and jurisdiction, family law remedies and procedures and have been familiarized with the law relating to social assistance, unemployment insurance, workmen's compensation and labour problems.

The operators are also able to contact Misters McLean and Fred-

ricksen twenty four hours a day if a caller desires information which they are not capable of giving. The law students, associated with Dal Legal Aid, will then dispense the appropriate information either to the caller directly or through the operator.

Surveys have shown that a substantial number of calls received by police departments are simply requests for legal information in civil as well as criminal matters. With this in mind, Dalhousie Legal Aid Services approached HELPLINE with the intention of establishing a legal information programme, using HELPLINE's well established around the clock, telephone service. Many people who need simple legal information will utilize the phone to obtain it, whereas they are unlikely to attend lectures or read pamphlets. Therefore this programme should provide greater access to the legal information they seek.

The new programme is part of a series of telephone information projects being conducted across the country under the auspices and with the financial support of the Federal Department of Justice. It is an experimental programme and it is hoped that not only will it achieve the result of assisting people to exercise their rights but that it will also go some way to improving the fabric of justice in our society.

If you need the assistance of HELPLINE for legal information, a referral, or for personal advice call, 422-7444.

NOTICE

Gilberto Oyandela, member of the Central Union of Workers in Chile will speak in Halifax on Wednesday, Sept. 17 at 8:00, Room 2805 Life Sciences Bldg.