

Pinochet backers say goodbye

At his funeral, ex-dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet was credited with preventing civil war in Chile.

The Miami Herald
Dec. 13, 2006

SANTIAGO, Chile - Some 5,000 Chileans bade farewell to former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet at his funeral Tuesday, championing him as an anti-communist who saved Chile from a civil war.

Pinochet's 17-year regime led to the deaths or disappearances of an estimated 3,197 people and the torture of thousands more. Today, the democratic country is divided between a minority of Pinochet loyalists and a majority that disapproves of his record.

President Michelle Bachelet, whom Pinochet's government jailed and tortured, didn't attend the funeral or refer to it during public appearances Tuesday. She had refused to let the ex-leader be honored as a former head of state. His funeral was outdoors on the terrace of the main military academy.

Many of his champions expressed anger about Bachelet's decision and the international condemnation of the general for his government's human-rights record.

"You have given him the best present, with all his people meeting here, honoring him and yelling his name, and keeping alive the fight for liberty that on that day in September in 1973 he planted in our country forever," Pinochet's daughter, Lucía Pinochet Hiriart, said to the crowd at the funeral.

Pinochet seized power in a bloody Sept. 11, 1973, coup that ousted elected socialist President Salvador Allende. Pinochet ruled the country until 1990, when he stepped aside for the elected government of Patricio Aylwin and the restoration of democracy.

GIVING CREDIT

Pinochet's supporters say he saved Chile from social chaos brought about by Allende's government. They also give Pinochet credit for turning Chile into one of Latin America's fastest-growing economies.

During the funeral, several thousand anti-Pinochet protesters gathered peacefully in front of the presidential palace for a music-filled rally to pay homage to Allende, who died in the coup.

Pinochet was facing prosecution on more than 300 human-rights and financial-corruption charges when he died at 91 on Sunday from complications from a heart attack. He never went on trial because he claimed his health was too poor.

"He's always been protected," said Joan Jara, whose husband, famed singer Víctor Jara, was tortured and murdered by Pinochet's government. "There's an unfinished story here that will go on and on and on."

Speakers at the funeral, who included the army chief, Gen. Oscar Izurieta Ferrer, made only passing references to Pinochet's record of human-rights abuses.

One of Pinochet's grandsons, Army Capt. Augusto Pinochet Molina, praised the coup that brought his grandfather to power. Pinochet was "a man who defeated in the midst of the Cold War the Marxist model, which planned to impose a totalitarian model," the grandson said. "He did it not through the vote but -- even better -- directly by armed means."

'UNACCEPTABLE'

Defense Minister Vivianne Blanlot, who represented the government at the funeral, was booed while entering and leaving. Afterward, she said it was "unacceptable" that Pinochet Molina had made his comments while in uniform.

Among those absent was Joaquín Lavín, the presidential candidate for the conservative Independent Democrat Union party in last year's elections. Other officials from the party were present.

After the service, Pinochet's body went by helicopter to an air base in the city of Concón to be cremated.

Polls show that about 20 percent of Chileans approve of Pinochet's government. He lost the support of many conservatives after news broke in 2004 about secret foreign bank accounts in which he had stowed millions of dollars. His wife and several of his children face fraud or tax-evasion charges.

