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Pinochet case: Step by step towards justice

The lifting of Augusto Pinochet's parliamentary immunity by the Santiago Court of Appeals marks another step on the way to justice for the many victims of human rights violations during his military rule, Amnesty International said today.

"Augusto Pinochet is now placed in the same category as any other Chilean citizen before the law, as the wall of impunity that so far has sheltered him is finally beginning to erode," the organization said. "However, many obstacles still remain in place, including the 1978 amnesty law which must be annulled."

Amnesty International considers yesterday's court decision to be a positive indication of the independence of the Chilean judiciary and expects that the Chilean Supreme Court will now uphold this ruling.

"The fact that in the course of these proceedings the independence of the judiciary has been maintained sends a positive signal to the international community and to the relatives of the victims who have been searching for the truth," the organization said.

"All judicial steps taken to clarify the crimes of the past and to bring those responsible to justice can only contribute to the healing of the deep wounds that have divided Chilean society for so long," Amnesty International added.

Background

Upon Augusto Pinochet's return to Chile on 3 March 2000, seven human rights lawyers submitted a request for his parliamentary immunity to be lifted, based on the case of 19 victims of "disappearance" during a military operation in the north of Chile known as "the Caravan of Death" (October 1973).

The hearing to consider lifting Augusto Pinochet's immunity to allow him to be investigated on the "Caravan of Death" case began in the Santiago Court of Appeals on 26 April. The decision of the Santiago Court of Appeals can be appealed to the Supreme Court. Such an appeal must be submitted within the first five days following the ruling.

Augusto Pinochet's parliamentary immunity derives from his status of Senator for life (*Senador Vitalicio*), which he acquired on 11 March 1998, following his retirement as Chief Commander of the Army (*Comandante en Jefe del Ejército*). He was entitled to such status as former President of the Republic, according to the Chilean constitution passed during his military government.

Currently Augusto Pinochet's name is included in over 110 lawsuits pending before Chilean courts with reference to human rights violations committed during his military government. ENDS.../ For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

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