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SECRET GROUPS LINKED TO SECURITY FORCES STEP UP POLITICAL REPRESSION IN
CHILE, SAYS AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Amnesty International said today (Thursday 25 August 1988) that clandestine groups linked to Chile's security forces have stepped up a campaign of death threats, abduction and torture of people opposed to the government.

In a new report, the worldwide human rights organization says that intimidation by such groups has become one of the most common methods of political repression in Chile and that many hundreds of people have been the target of threats or attacks against them or their relatives and associates.

Repeated death threats are the most common method of intimidation but well over 100 people have reported being physically attacked or kidnapped in the past 18 months, the report says.

Among the victims of intimidation have been whole families, including children. The report cites the cases of an abduction attempt on the 12-year-old son of a trade union leader and of a boy of 10 stopped in the street and told to pass on threats to his parents.

"Anyone perceived as critical of government practices risks harassment and thousands live with the uncertainty of possible abuse," the report says.

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Amnesty International is an independent worldwide movement working impartially for the release of all prisoners of conscience, fair and prompt trials for political prisoners and an end to torture and executions. It is funded by donations from its members and supporters throughout the world. It has formal relations with the United Nations, Unesco, the Council of Europe, the Organization of African Unity and the Organization of American States.

Those targeted include political and trade union activists, members of human rights groups, community leaders in poor neighbourhoods and bishops, clergy, lawyers and court officials.

Also singled out recently have been journalists and groups campaigning for free elections and a "no" vote in the proposed plebiscite on the military junta's presidential candidate, expected to take place in October.

The report says many of those abducted have been beaten, while some were given electric shocks, burned with hot metal or acid or had signs or initials scored into their flesh.

Homes have been raided in the middle of the night and the occupants threatened at gunpoint. Hundreds of other victims have received sinister phone calls or messages warning of impending execution. Dead animals have sometimes been delivered to reinforce the threats.

The report includes the case of Sergio del Solar, President of the Quilpué Human Rights Commission, who found a cat impaled on the railings outside his home in November 1987. Its throat had been slit. "It was terrible. All I could think to do was hide it so my family wouldn't suffer," he said.

Another victim of intimidation was Oscar Eloy Gomez, regional president of the Chilean Teachers' Association in the northern town of Arica and leader of the local campaign for a "no" vote in the presidential plebiscite. He was seized by masked men after midnight on 27 April 1988, forced into a car and driven to an isolated spot. He was handcuffed, threatened, beaten, kicked and had his jaw broken. Before being released he was warned that this would happen again if he continued his activities.

Amnesty International says the death threats cannot be ignored. The secret groups are said to have been behind the "disappearance" of five political activists in September 1987, the murder of four opposition politicians in 1986 and the killing of three communist party members in 1985.

Amnesty International's report contains 128 case histories of alleged victims of intimidation between January and June this year.

The Chilean government has claimed that the threats and attacks are the work of criminals or independent political extremists. But Amnesty International says evidence which has emerged through the courts, the groups' methods, the impunity with which they operate and their vast resources all clearly point to a link with government forces and official condonement of their actions.

Hundreds of complaints and petitions for protection have been submitted to the courts but not a single case has resulted in those responsible for abuses being convicted. Judges who have tried to pursue cases have reported that their investigations were blocked by lack of cooperation from the security forces, the report says.

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