

Chile Court Strips Pinochet of Immunity

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SANTIAGO, Chile -- The Supreme Court stripped Gen. Augusto Pinochet of immunity from prosecution Wednesday, paving the way for a trial of the former dictator for his alleged role in the disappearance and killing of 15 dissidents during his 1973-90 regime.

The court voted 10-6 to strip the 89-year-old of the immunity from prosecution he enjoyed as former president and authorize his trial in the "Operation Colombo" case, Chief Justice Jose Benquis said.

That case involved the slaying of 119 dissidents whose bodies were found in neighboring Argentina in 1975, but Pinochet would face charges for only 15 victims whose relatives filed a criminal suit against him.

At the time the bodies were discovered, Pinochet's regime said they had died in clashes among rival armed opposition groups. It supported its claim by exhibiting reports in two magazines, *Lea* of Argentina and *O Dia* of Brazil. But both magazines published only that issue and then disappeared.

Wednesday's ruling, which cannot be appealed, authorized the judge handling the case, Victor Montiglio, to try Pinochet. Montiglio did not immediately announce his plans.

Pinochet was not required to appear in court and remained secluded at his guarded suburban Santiago mansion. His lawyers did not immediately comment.

Attorneys for the relatives of the victims expressed satisfaction.

"I think the Supreme Court has given some hope to make sure that impunity will not prevail, at least in this case," attorney Hernan Quezada said.

His colleague, Boris Paredes, said that "this is probably one of the cases in which Pinochet's responsibility is clearer."

Pinochet faces dozens of lawsuits stemming from widespread human rights abuses during his regime, a time when 3,197 dissidents were slain or disappeared, according to an investigation by an independent commission appointed by the civilian government that succeeded the dictator.

He has now been stripped of immunity three times for abuse cases. In another case, involving alleged tax evasion related to multimillion-dollar bank accounts he holds overseas, Pinochet has been stripped of immunity by an appeals court, but the ruling has not been confirmed by the top court.

Pinochet has so far avoided trial because of ill health. Two cases were already dropped by the Supreme Court for that reason, although that finding did not cover the Operation Colombo and tax evasion cases.

Pinochet has been diagnosed with a mild case of dementia, and his doctors say he has suffered several mild strokes since 1998. He also has diabetes and arthritis and uses a heart pacemaker.

His foes insist he exaggerates his health problems to escape trial.

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