



REUTERS

Pinochet-era general flees justice, releases video

By Gideon Long

SANTIAGO, June 13 (Reuters) - A senior military officer from the 1973-1990 Chilean dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet has fled just before he was to be imprisoned and released a video declaring his innocence.

Retired Gen. Eduardo Iturriaga was due to report to prison on Monday to start a five-year term for the kidnap of a leftist Pinochet opponent in 1974.

But he failed to show up and later issued a videotaped statement in which he says he was the victim of "an arbitrary, biased, unconstitutional and unjust verdict."

"For years I've accepted injustice from the justice system. Not any more!" he says in the video, which shows him seated before an unidentifiable backdrop, dressed in civilian clothes and reading from a statement.

The video, which was sent to friends, was broadcast on Chilean state television on Wednesday, and his statement was published in local newspapers.

Nearly 3,200 people died in political violence during the dictatorship, the vast majority killed by Pinochet's forces and by the infamous secret police of which Iturriaga was a member.

Former members of Pinochet's armed forces often complain of being victimized and persecuted for human rights abuses since Chile returned to democracy in 1990.

Human rights groups say such trials are necessary to bring about justice and heal the wounds of Chile's past.

Pinochet, the most infamous of the dictators who ruled much of South America in the 1970s and 1980s, died last year having evaded several attempts to put him on trial.

The Chilean judiciary has jailed scores of officers from the Pinochet era. But all four members of the junta that seized power in the 1973 coup died without being tried.

Chile's Supreme Court this month ordered Iturriaga imprisoned for the kidnap of Luis San Martin, a member of a leftist political party outlawed and persecuted by Pinochet's right-wing regime.

San Martin was arrested in 1974 and taken to a detention center run by the DINA, the secret police force that abducted, tortured and killed scores of opponents during the early days of the dictatorship.

Iturriaga, who headed a DINA department at the time of the abduction, said he had nothing to do with it.

"I never knew nor saw (San Martin)," he said in the video. "I neither arrested him nor ordered his arrest. I neither kidnapped him nor ordered his kidnapping."

The government of socialist President Michelle Bachelet, herself briefly held in a Pinochet detention center in the 1970s, urged Iturriaga to give himself up, as did relatives of victims of the dictatorship.

"Why do we have to put up with sedition and a lack of bravery from soldiers who thought they were so brave when they had power and guns?" asked Norma Rojas, one of a handful of relatives who staged a protest on Wednesday after hearing news of Iturriaga's escape from justice.

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