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Latin American Trends

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Chile: Worsening Church-State Relations

Recent criticism of the government by the Catholic Church marks a step backward in church-state relations and may encourage other critics of the junta's policies to step up their attacks. An open church-state split will probably be averted, but the Catholic hierarchy is likely to be more outspoken on such issues as human rights and the economic plight of the poor in Chile.

The church has blamed the government for the unprecedented demonstrations at the airport when three prominent Chilean bishops returned from a controversial conference in Ecuador over a week ago. President Pinochet denied allegations that security agents orchestrated the anticlerical violence, but  confirm government involvement. The church reacted by excommunicating security personnel accused of roughing up the bishops.

A hardening attitude on the part of the church was implicit in the later issuance of a sharp attack on the government for the summary expulsion of two prominent civil rights attorneys on August 6. In an unusually forthright statement, the church censured the government for practices that create a "moral problem" on which the church could not remain silent. It charged that the junta's refusal to define the grounds for the lawyers' expulsion was "unacceptable and closes the road to all reconciliation." The church's position will very likely encourage more open expressions of antigovernment sentiment from other quarters, particularly Christian Democratic followers of former president Frei.

The incidents will give exiles and foreign critics new issues to combine with fresh reports of

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detentions and disappearances of persons in Chile. With convincing evidence of government intimidation of its domestic opponents, the UN human rights commission will probably find renewed justification for pressing its mandate to investigate the Chilean situation.

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President Pinochet has reacted by personally denying that relations with the church have been impaired. A luncheon meeting he arranged with the Cardinal and other bishops took place in "a climate of frankness and cordiality" [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Despite these disclaimers, the government has banned any radio or television reporting on the expulsion of the two lawyers or the airport incident.

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