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Chilean Military Government Reappraising Controversial Policies

The Pinochet government in Chile appears to be reappraising its policies in reaction to reverses domestically and internationally. It has taken a few tentative steps toward reforming its internal security practices, but winning international acceptance is probably beyond the capabilities of the present regime. Chile's economic depression would be difficult to cure even if the government were more favorably regarded by foreign lenders and investors.

Chile's military government has been repeatedly pilloried by foreign governments, parties, societies, and international tribunals for its harsh treatment of supporters of the deposed Allende regime and its state-of-siege attitude toward dissent. Concessions to world opinion have not staved off three new blows in the past month:

- The UN Human Rights Commission issued another indictment of Chile's treatment of prisoners and suspects.
- The International Commission of Jurists declared that the government's legal actions were insufficient to protect prisoners from torture and maltreatment.
- The US Senate voted to cut off all military sales and deliveries.

The Chilean armed forces get most of their training and equipment from the US and are dependent on it for replacement and modernization. Alternate sources in Western Europe have been alienated. Chile's leaders are now facing the fact that the welfare of the military and the economy may well depend on the government's undertaking political reforms.

Hesitant to Change

President Pinochet has stubbornly resisted dismantling the authoritarian apparatus created by the junta after Allende's ouster. Fear of a resurgence left, an overriding concern, has been the chief cause of the heavy-handed measures that have characterized the regime.

Pinochet has set an austere tone for what he and his colleagues see as a period of reconstruction during which all political activity must be banned and total control with the military's policies enforced. He sees Chile as the target of a worldwide Marxist conspiracy and the victim of an unjust campaign by liberal groups in the Western democracies, most of which he regards as having been undermined and neutralized by the communists.

In public, Pinochet still attacks foreign enemies, as the case of Chile's troubles, but it is probable he seems to accept that the government's policies have contributed to its isolation. He may be considering taking steps to correct some abuses before the Organization of American States convenes in Santiago in June, bringing the military government under scrutiny of the international press.

Taking the First Steps

A debate is under way within the government on both political and economic reforms. Some junta members and government advisers reportedly are urging Pinochet to set a date for the termination of military rule, but he is unlikely to do this. At most, he will probably press for early completion of the constitution that is now being drafted.

The head of the constitutional reform commission is promising completion of the document during the first half of this year. This would presumably give the junta a chance to hold a referendum, which it could point to as evidence of a popular mandate.

Some presidential advisers believe that recent decrees spelling out rules for treatment of political prisoners will correct the most flagrant abuses and give the military government a better image. Others, including air force junta member General



Chilean junta members Admiral Merino, President Pinochet, and General Leigh

Leigh, blame the Directorate of National Intelligence for ignoring past government directives and want it modified and placed under new leadership. This is unlikely to appeal to Pinochet, who has close personal ties to the intelligence chief.

The most recent indication that Pinochet may be responding to pressure for change is that a department of human rights has been set up within the interior ministry. This department has been charged with investigating all complaints of abuses of human rights. It will report directly to the President and is supposed to formulate proposals to improve security procedures and treatment of prisoners. Pinochet may take its advice—allegedly already given—to shut down some notorious interrogation centers.

There are other signs that the government is trying to clean up its detention procedures. Under the provisions of recent decrees outlining oversight guidelines and guarantees of rights for political prisoners, both the president of the supreme court and the justice minister have made surprise visits to the Tres Alamos detention center in Santiago. They passed their findings to Pinochet and indicated that their unannounced visits would continue and would include trips by their representatives to centers outside the capital.

It is still unclear whether the government will close the "private" interrogation centers operated by the intelligence services. The worst cases of torture are said to have occurred in these makeshift installations.

Changing Partners

The junta will probably soon undergo its first personnel change since the coup in September 1973. Admiral Merino, the naval chief, suffered a heart attack in mid-February and is expected to be replaced. Merino's departure would elevate the air force member, General Leigh—a frequent critic of Pinochet's policies—to the senior position and make him next in line to head the junta.

opposition on economic issues is poorly organized and do not have the will to risk attacking the regime openly.

Inflation has been a top government priority but little progress has been made combatting it. The small decrease in the inflation rate has been more than offset by a 13 percent decline in gross national product.

Chile is hurt by the continued low price of copper on world markets. The problem is compounded by the high cost of petroleum and other major imports. Foreign debt service payments now amount to about \$800 million per year. Chile hopes to avoid having to repeat last year's rescheduling exercise with its major creditors, but it cannot cover its minimal obligations from international loan sources unless it can arrange bilateral concessions or moratoria.

Failure to secure financial support could mean deeper cuts in basic imports, which could add to the political problems. A squeeze on capital imports would further depress industrial output. That, in turn, would increase unemployment, retard growth, and add to inflation.

US Military Aid

A US decision to withhold military equipment would increase Chile's sensitivity to the intentions of Peru, which is militarily much stronger. Although Chile could react sharply to such a US decision, perhaps by ousting the US military mission, its need for future aid would probably be another spur for some political change in a bid to improve relations with Washington.

On March 8 Pinochet replaced the labor minister, an incompetent air force general, with a young university professor with no known views on labor matters. Pinochet may hope by this act to give the appearance of being more responsive to labor leaders, who have petitioned the government to do something about the steep climb in the cost of living and sharply rising unemployment.

Gloomy Economic Outlook

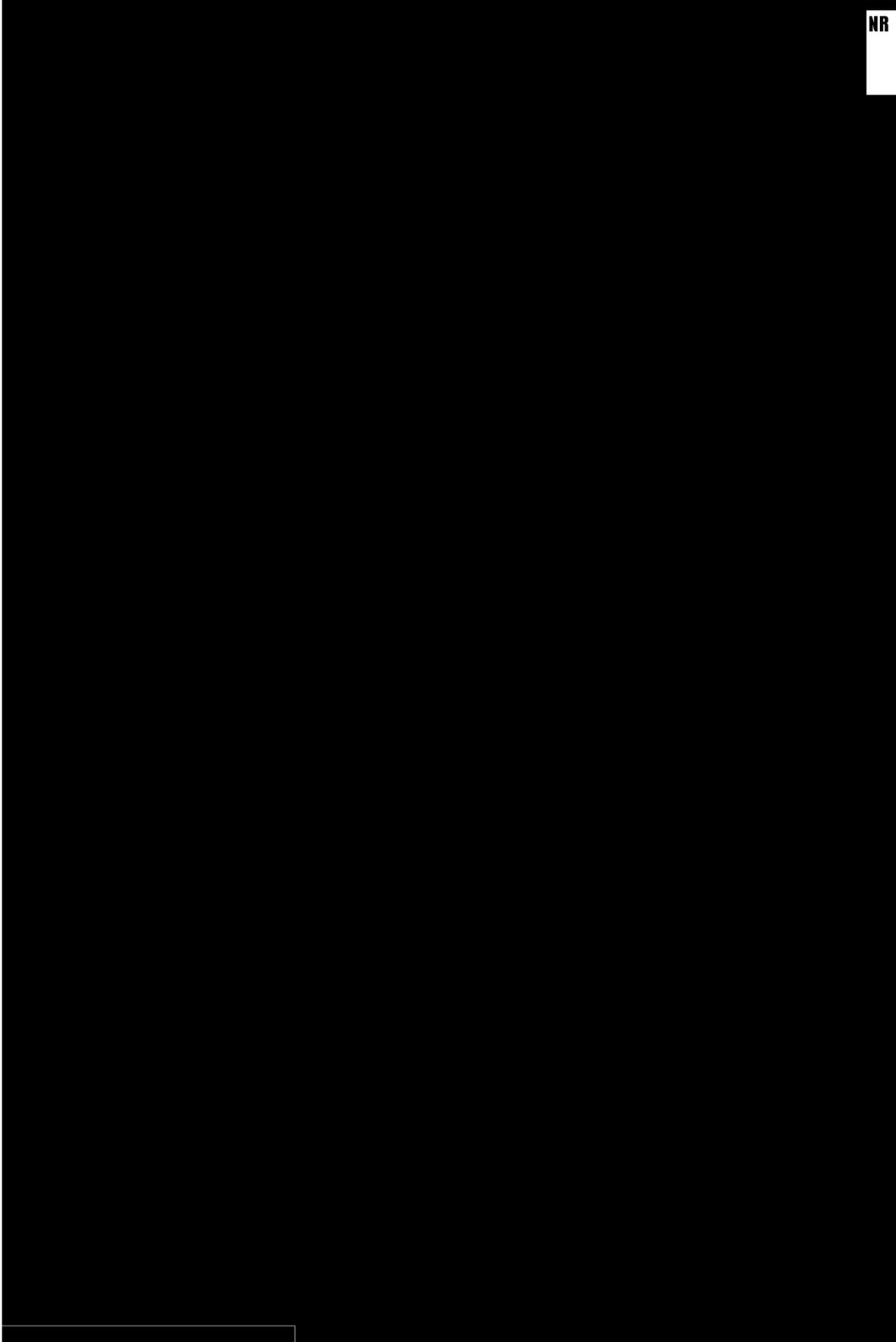
The Chilean economy appears to be heading toward another difficult year and prospects for rapid recovery are not encouraging. The southern hemisphere winter will work additional hardships on the middle and lower classes. Some officials are calling for substantial changes in the economic austerity program, but the junta's basic policies will probably remain intact.

An 18-percent rate of unemployment, a low level of production, and shortages of agricultural commodities and capital goods will impose strains, but discontent is not so great as to be a serious threat to government stability. Potential sources of

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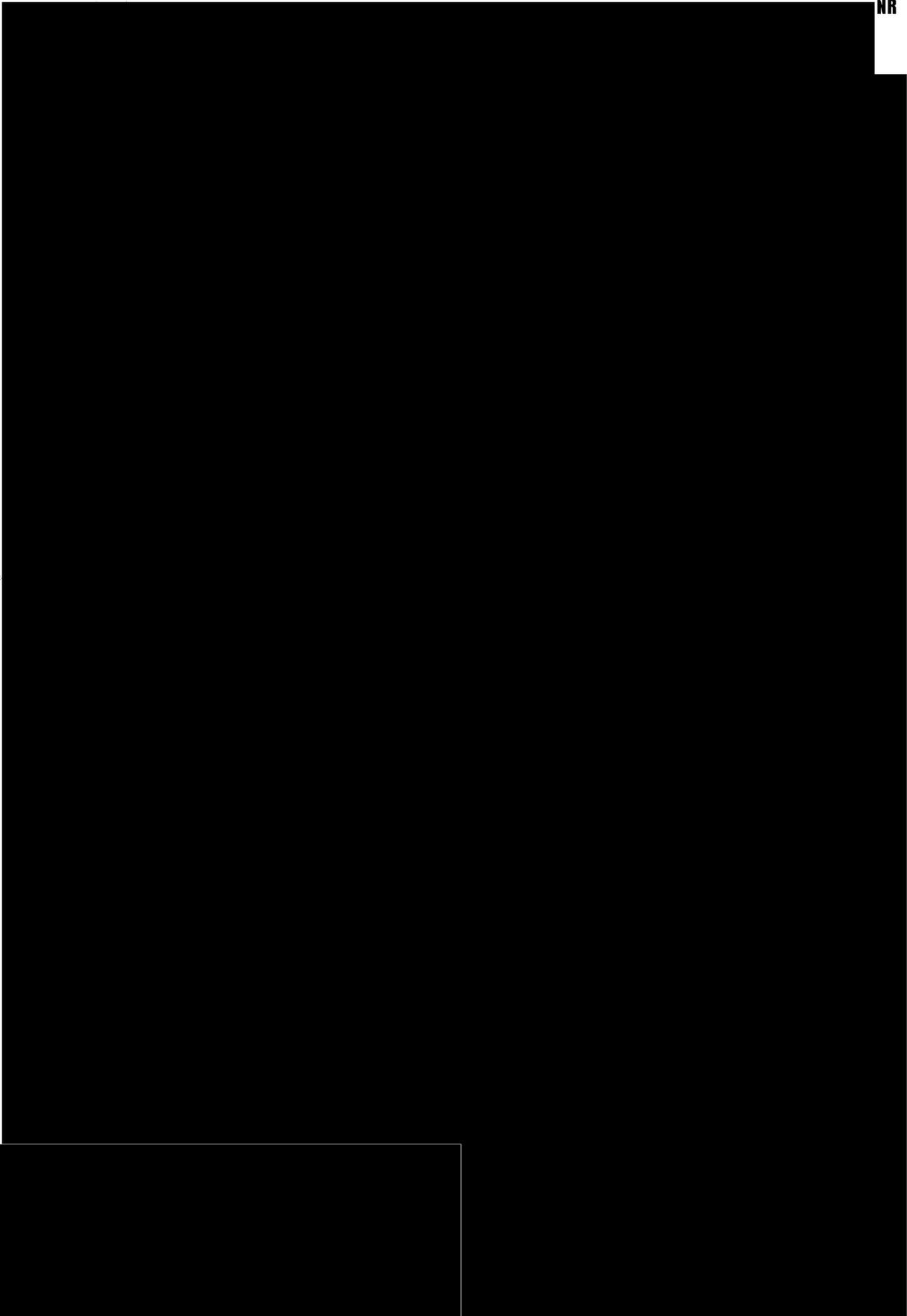
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