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Latin American Trends

STAFF NOTES

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Chile: New Grist for Human Rights Critics

The Chilean government's expulsion of a lawyer who recently talked to a visiting US congressional delegation seems certain to provoke an adverse reaction abroad. The lawyer, Jose Zalaquett, departed for France on April 12 after the courts turned down his appeal to overturn the order.

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The Chilean Foreign Ministry has fervently denied any link between Zalaquett's meeting with US congressmen and his expulsion on grounds that he was a threat to internal security. Officials in Santiago had earlier given assurances to our embassy that there would be no retaliation against persons who met with the US delegation.

The vague reasoning behind the government's decision suggests that concrete evidence in the case is lacking. Nevertheless, it is possible that the attorney was engaged in political activities considered illegal by the junta. Zalaquett had earlier been instrumental in contesting alleged violations of human rights for the interdenominational Committee for Peace, which was dissolved last December after the government charged that it was influenced by leftists. He had been arrested in November and spent the next two months in prison--a move that US officials in Santiago have interpreted as a stern warning that he should get out of the country.

The Chilean court upheld the junta's expulsion order, as it has done in similar instances before. [REDACTED] the judges were not in agreement with the executive's action but had little discretion in contesting it under the wide state-of-siege powers exercised by the military government.

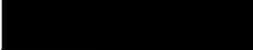
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Chile's Raul Cardinal Silva had already declared the Zalaquett deportation "regrettable." Catholic organizations abroad are likely to echo the sentiment. The Pinochet government's tendency to overreact in such situations will probably once again reap a harvest of ill will from critics in Europe and the US. Indeed, the regime seems to be putting its worst foot forward at the very time that it is apparently initiating some firm steps to prevent flagrant abuses of human rights and foster a propitious climate for the meeting of the OAS in Santiago in June.



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