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Chile: Protests and Violence Increase

Demonstrations on 24 March against President Pinochet's economic and political policies drew larger crowds, reflected better organization, and sparked more violence than any opposition activity in recent years. For the first time since 1973, the national police were forced to use water cannon in downtown Santiago to disperse an estimated 1,000 rock-throwing demonstrators, who were demanding jobs, food, greater political freedom, and more government sensitivity to human rights. The demonstration—organized by Communist Party youth members—followed nine bombings earlier in the day that damaged several government facilities and cut off water to thousands of homes in eastern sections of the capital. Nationwide, more than 250 people were arrested.

The moderate Christian Democrats, the largest opposition party, prohibited their members from joining the 24 March demonstrations, but they are participating in a broad opposition front that may stage demonstrations of its own. We expect this kind of opposition activity to increase. The protests will have to draw considerable wider backing across the political spectrum, however, before they begin to influence government policies.

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The comparative success of the demonstrations is likely to encourage the Communists and attract more participants to future antigovernment rallies. Moreover, the government's vow to stand firmly against demonstrators could lead to more repressive actions by security forces, further fueling support for the opposition.