

A REPORT BY THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON POLITICAL IMPRISONMENT AND TORTURE, AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

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B. RESPONSES FROM INSTITUTIONS

THE CHILEAN ARMY: THE END OF A VISION*

The Army Intelligence Battalion (the BIE) has recently been closed down. At the same time the Military Security Group was created and given the go-ahead. This is an eminently specialised unit, reduced in terms of personnel and prepared to undertake missions different from those carried out in the past, particularly up to 1990, being a product of both the national and international situation at the end of the 20th century.

The creation of this unit is also in line with recent legislation which was looking to give the State an organ of intelligence capable of producing the input necessary for resolutions at the political level and with whom we have to interact.

This is not merely a change of name, face or place of work. A function such as Intelligence and Military Security, given its growing complexity and support towards decisions taken at military level, needs real and not cosmetic content. Thus the closing down of the BIE has to be viewed as part of a general process, both progressive and anticipated, towards the planning of institutional modernisation for the national and international times we live in today.

It is these that show us the new paradigms to follow. Nevertheless, strictly speaking, this change is not in essence the only one: the theme goes much deeper and the closure of the BIE is only one event, albeit an important one, within a larger and more relevant group of planned actions.

In effect, the Chilean Army has been adopting decisions, for a number of years now, that tend to abandon concepts centred on the Cold War. Here was a vision that was generalised and seen in different protagonists

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and organisations throughout the world and led to the radicalisation of conflict and the imposition of a logic of confrontation, which in turn led to the acceptance of any procedures and methods of fighting as being a legitimate means to obtain or maintain power. It led to politics being understood from a perspective that made enemies of those who were only adversaries and to a reduction of respect for people and their dignity and rights.

It was this same vision that put a distinctive stamp on our political, social and economic relationships and that prevailed among us Chileans for many years, like the Cold War that inspired it.

As a consequence of this situation, the Chilean Army could not escape from being sucked into the inevitable maelstrom of this vision and from the events which it precipitated, on a world scale, thereby converting it into one of the main protagonists of these same events in our own country.

Within this context, it acted in the absolute certainty that its behaviour was just and that it was defending the common good and the majority of the citizens. One can totally disagree with this statement; it is obviously permissible but it is not permissible to forget either the logic of the confrontation that was prevailing at that moment or the behaviour that it provoked in Chileans as a result.

Does this scenario of global conflict that I have described excuse the violations of human rights which occurred in Chile? My reply is one and unequivocal: no. The violations of human rights can never ever have ethical justification.

Because of this my words must not be understood as a smoothing over of what happened but rather as one more effort in the search for truth because, as I have said before, truth liberates and brings peace to the soul. But it must be the whole truth and always understood in the historical context in which the events happened.

In our case, exceptional and abnormal circumstances together with a great deal of hatred deeply divided us. Nevertheless we are dealing with a period and a way of life which as a people and a nation we have left behind.

As Commander in Chief of the Army I have turned an important part of my commitment towards adapting the institution to the reality of a Chile that aspires to development and international co-operation and peace and to the reality of a country, our own, that takes the principles and values of democracy as a political system for its own and respect for the dignity of a human being as a vital element for healthy national and international co-existence.

Taken from this perspective, as I have already stated, the closure of BIE is not an isolated event. It concludes a process of gradual and succes-

sive changes that highlight the new architecture of the Army, one that is based on considering our neighbours as real partners and friends with projects in common. It is also an educational process of re-valuing human rights, a thoughtful revision and reformulation of our rules and procedures and a re-positioning in the society that we both owe and serve, searching for a greater closeness that will let us be perceived as an institution for all Chileans.

The Chilean Army took the hard but irreversible decision to assume the responsibilities that, as an institution, fall on it for all the punishable and morally unacceptable events of the past. Moreover it has repeatedly recognised the misdeeds and crimes committed by personnel directly under its command. It has censured them, criticised them publicly and permanently co-operated with the courts, so as to contribute, wherever possible, to truth and reconciliation.

At the same time it has expressed sympathy for the sufferings of the victims of these violations, recognising that they received treatment that does not fit with the permanent and historic doctrine of the institution. Violations that it does not justify and with respect to which it has made and continues to make concrete endeavours to ensure that this never happens again.

An expression of this line of conduct has been our attendance at the Mesa de Dialogo (Table for Dialogue) and the effort to compile useful information that would lead to the establishment of the final destinations of those who disappeared while being detained, as well as sending this to the courts, the institutions in charge of establishing the legal truth and applying the law.

The same style of conduct can be seen more recently in our definitive commitment to and collaboration with the National Commission on Political Prisoners and Torture, whose content and conclusions we assume with same calmness and responsibility with which we have acted up to now.

I can confirm, therefore, by offering this synthesis of the process of change which the Army has been carrying out, that the institution under my command has been transformed from an organisation with its logic and actions based on those of the Cold War, to one for the Chile of today.

It seems to me that with the process that the Army and the country have lived through, the lessons learnt by us all and the overcoming of divisions through truth and justice, we are on our way to a promising future which, taking into account these experiences, will give Chile the sufficient strength and cohesion in our society to confront a world that is complex, competitive and full of heterogeneous threats.

Nevertheless I also believe that we can advance still more in perfecting that democratic society to which all of us Chileans aspire, and that one of the ways to do this is through overcoming prejudices and mistrust, which, also in the past, led either to the ostracism of the Armed Forces in their barracks or to a support for these inappropriate in the military. This dichotomy, as I have expressed it on another occasion, can be resolved with grandeur by the Chileans.

The just medium between these two deviations will be the virtuous paradigm which, as a society, we will find to establish the limits between blind isolation, self exclusion and military tutelage. We are talking about a just medium, however, that is not for us in the military to find but for all citizens through their institutions.

Our task in that direction, perhaps still uncompleted, must be limited to an institutional transition from visions of the past, like something determined by the Cold War, to others that are contemporary and concordant to the Chile of today. A task to which we will continue to dedicate our best and most honest efforts, as soldiers and as Chileans.

Santiago, November 3rd 2004. □