

# Mission to Chile

## Report of World Medical Association

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*Since 1984 the Chilean Medical Association has been actively campaigning against the use of torture and against the physicians who participate in it. In July 1986 during a general protest strike two office holders of the association were arrested and taken to prison. The association invited the secretary general of the World Medical Association to help free them. This is a report of that visit.*

DR. J. L. ONZALEZ REUES and Dr. F. Rivas Larrain, president and secretary general of the Chilean Medical Association, were arrested on July 10, 1986 and taken to Capucinos, an annex of the public prison in Santiago. In the last three years, the Chilean Medical Association has been campaigning vigorously against the use of torture and against physicians who participate in it. I had been to Santiago, Chile, in February 1984 to hold a press conference in which I expressed the WMA's full support of the actions taken by the Chilean physicians.

Last year, the Chilean Medical Association joined other professional groups (lawyers, engineers, architects, etc.) to create a national civic assembly. Dr. Gonzalez was elected its president. The purpose is to unite all groups opposed to the regime. The Chilean Medical Association's main cause is to defend the rights of the patient and medical ethics, which is directly linked with the defense of human rights.

The National Civic Assembly called a two-day general protest strike (July 2-3), during which violent confrontations between civilians and military patrols led to three deaths and several injuries. Two young demonstrators were seriously burned, their bodies were found near the airport.

The version given by the opposition—based on testimony by witnesses, including that published by the Catholic Church—affirmed that an army patrol had poured gasoline over the victims. On the other hand, the government version stated reports by their witness that the accident had been caused by the victims themselves while handling Molotov cocktails. One of them died from the severe burns received.

Fourteen leaders of the National Civic Assembly—including Dr. Gonzalez and Dr. Rivas—were detained on charges of inciting to riot and violence during the demonstrations.

Alerted by the Chilean Medical Association, the WMA secretary general issued a press release to international press agencies informing them about the situation and sent letters and telegrams to the Chilean government and the judiciary appealing on behalf of the two colleagues detained. These measures were taken in concert with Amnesty International and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAS), among others. On July 24, the Chilean Medical Association telephoned and asked me to travel to Chile to help them in the effort to free

their president and secretary general.

Contacts were made with the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Chilean ambassador in Brussels to discuss the feasibility of an urgent mission to the Chilean government and the judiciary. Several meetings were arranged in Santiago with the help of the Belgian ambassador in that capital. In August, I arrived in Santiago to meet with the Belgian ambassador and with representatives of the Chilean Medical Association, thanks to Dr. Jorge Jimenez de la Jara who assisted and interpreted during my stay in Santiago.

On Sunday, August 3, the first visit to Drs. Gonzalez and Rivas took place and preparations were made for the forthcoming meetings with government authorities and the judiciary. My last day in Chile, August 6, a second visit with the imprisoned colleagues was allowed and prior to my departure for the airport, a press conference was held at the headquarters of the Chilean Medical Association.

I wish to stress that at all times I was received with deference and kindness by all those with whom I met. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that I was announced as the representative of more than two million free and independent doctors not connected with any communist country and to the excellent liaison work done by the Belgian Foreign Affairs department, the Belgian ambassador in Santiago, and the Chilean ambassador in Brussels.

In Chile I met with:

- Alberto Cardemil, under-secretary of Internal Affairs, known as the Government's key man in repression activities against the opposition;
- Hugo Rosende, Minister of Justice and personal friend of Dr. L. Gonzalez;
- Dr. Winston Chinchon, Minister of Health, and his chief of staff, Dr. Ricardo Caram;
- Rafael Retamal, president of the Supreme Court;
- Judge German Valenzuela Erazo, President of the court in charge of the affair and responsible for the final ruling;
- Professor Amador Neghme, President of the Academy of Medicine;
- Monsignor Sergio Valech, Auxiliary Bishop, leader of Catholic action in the country.

From these meetings, I gathered that the lawyers had

not petitioned for the prisoners to be released on bail. Therefore, during my meeting with Judge Valenzuela, I officially presented a request for the release of Drs. Gonzalez and Rivas, pledging the moral guarantee and support of the two million physicians represented in the WMA.

I was authorised to inform the Chilean government that in the event these two colleagues were convicted, Belgium and I, myself—as well as the University of Louvain, represented by its Rector, Monsignor Massaux—were ready to grant them asylum if their sentence were commuted to exile, which the Chilean government would be willing to consider. If so, the Belgian government would permit them to practise in Belgium during their exile and under the same conditions as Belgian physicians.

Advised of this possibility, Drs. Gonzalez and Rivas were reluctant on account of their solidarity with the 15 other people arrested for the same reasons. Their lawyers, in the meantime, confirmed their intention of requesting, within the next 48 hours, that the prisoners be released on bail.

A meeting was also held with Dr. Alvaro Reyes and Dr. Ramon Rojas who had spent three months in the same prison as Dr. Gonzalez and Dr. Rivas for failing to report to the police a wounded man they had treated at the Chiloe clinic. They had been released on bail the week before. Two other colleagues, Ramiro Olivares and Juan Macaya, are still in prison on the same charges. They work for Vicaria de la Solidaridad, a Catholic Church human rights organisation in Santiago.

I had the opportunity of visiting las Condes private clinic and El Salvador University Hospital, where I was received by Professor Umberto Reyes, Head of the Internal Medicine Service. There is an indescribable contrast between the luxury of the clinic and the meagerness of the hospital, which is so deprived of the most essential equipment and personnel that it has been forced to close some of its departments for lack of resources.

The enormous discrimination between medical care available to the rich and to the poor raises a serious ethical problem and is unquestionably conducive to considerations of euthanasia motivated by a total lack of medical care for the poor.

All physicians encountered, from heads of departments to medical students and residents, unanimously denounced this situation which they consider an unacceptable breach of human rights. They expressed their moral discontent by actively supporting the opposition and by their solidarity with Dr. Gonzalez and Dr. Rivas and the National Civic Assembly they had helped to create and which they diligently direct.

As mentioned, the visit ended with a press conference during which an objective report was presented on what had been done in Santiago. Special emphasis was given to the total independence and apolitical attitude with which the assignment had been accomplished. The sup-

port received in Belgium and the assistance given by Belgian diplomatic circles, the Chilean Medical Association, temporarily presided over by Dr. Acuna, the Chilean Academy of Medicine, the Universities, and the Catholic Church were duly acknowledged and appreciated. Recognition was given to the Chilean authorities and judiciary for their understanding. Obviously, they were impressed by the World Medical Association's moral prestige and the strength it represents. I said that I hoped Chilean justice would take into consideration the detainees' moral and professional values, which no one I met questioned at any time. In conclusion, I would like to note how impressed I was by the enormous contrast in Chile between, on the one hand, the serious government action against the basic principles of medical ethics and human rights—the latter now under review by a commission headed by the department of the interior and a group of jurists and lawyers—and, on the other hand, the great freedom enjoyed by a vigorous opposition press, the freedom of opponents to express themselves against the regime, and the absence of border control measures.

No entry or exit visa was required, and luggage was not searched at any time. Neither was this an exception because of the special nature of my trip. The rules are identical for all travellers, and this was confirmed by colleagues in the Chilean Medical Association. Nobody was able to explain whether this contrast should be interpreted as a strength or weakness of the government.

On August 19, I was informed that Drs. J. L. Gonzalez and F. Rivas had been released on bail that day and authorised to stay in Chile. Drs. Ramiro Olivares and Juan Macaya were also released for days after my visit to Santiago. The Minister of Health, Dr. Chinchon, was dismissed from his functions in the government a few days after my visit.

### Correction

In the June 1988 issue please note the following correction in Health Care, Health Policy and Underdevelopment in India by Ravi Duggal. On page 17 the sentence beginning 'The fact is that Britain's . . . should read: The fact is that Britain's and USA's state health expenditure was equivalent to India's national income and their health care facilities between 30 to 40 times more than India. This gap is even worse today. In 1984 health expenditure in the USA was \$ 1,580 per capita per year out of which state expenditure accounted for 41 per cent.

On page 20, the sentence beginning 'The budget skyrocketed' should read. The budget skyrocketed from a mere Rs 2.2 crore to Rs 25 crore in the third plan.

The title of table 1 should read Growth of Health Infrastructure and Investment in India. The figures in brackets in column 2 refer to private hospitals and in column 5, rural beds.