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Latin America's 'dirty wars' are re-examined

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SANTIAGO, Chile - Latin America is finally owning up to its "dirty wars," the nightmarish campaigns of state-sponsored violence in which hundreds of thousands died or "disappeared." But the death of Chile's Gen. Augusto Pinochet shows the continent's leftist leaders of today must act fast to expose the truth while the masterminds of this savagery are still alive.

Momentum is growing behind new human rights investigations in Chile and other countries where dictators ruled with impunity. Prosecutors are dusting off cases of abduction and torture, digging up mass graves and using DNA to identify the victims.

In Chile, Uruguay and Argentina, judges are finding ways around the amnesty laws that long protected the perpetrators. In Brazil and Mexico, democratically elected presidents have finally opened up long-secret files to provide evidence against those responsible.

And 10 years after U.N.-sponsored peace accords in Guatemala stilled the bloodiest of these conflicts, the discovery of a huge archive of files maintained by the notorious National Police may give the victims answers, if not justice.

Chilean President Michelle Bachelet and Argentine President Nestor Kirchner are among the leftist leaders who consider such prosecutions vital to the restoration of democracy.

"The dictatorship model sought a fractured society, immobile, obedient," Kirchner said as he marked this year's 30th anniversary of Argentina's military coup. "We still face terrible consequences. Lamentably, the true authors of this model have not suffered any punishment at all."

Inspired by the Cuban revolution and communist principles, small bands of armed leftists emerged in the 1960s and '70s across Latin America to orchestrate kidnappings, bombings and insurgencies. The response, state-sanctioned terror and authoritarian governments secretly supported by U.S. intelligence, cast a wide net.

Many non-violent sympathizers were swept up along with suspected guerrillas, and U.S. intelligence agencies supported the dictators through Operation Condor, a scheme developed by Pinochet's secret police to deny dissidents safe havens.

In Chile, the government said 3,197 people were killed for political reasons during

Pinochet's 1973-1990 dictatorship. In just seven years of military rule in Argentina during the 1970s and '80s, official records show, 13,000 people were made to "disappear," but human rights groups put the number closer to 30,000.

Mexico's police and army summarily executed more than 700 people from the 1960s to 1980s, according to a report quietly released last month that signals the Mexican government's first acceptance of responsibility for its dirty war.

In the region's transition back to peace and civilian rule, most such excesses were pardoned or placed out of reach under amnesty agreements. In El Salvador, where 75,000 died and 7,000 disappeared before a 1992 peace treaty, an amnesty deal has prevented any prosecutions.

And in Guatemala, where the army and police killed 93 percent of the 200,000 people who died in the 1960-1996 civil war, the peace accords meant only a few dozen low-level soldiers stood trial.

Uruguayan judges last month got around their country's amnesty law, which was limited to crimes committed inside Uruguay, by arresting former president-turned-dictator Juan Maria Bordaberry in the 1976 killings of opponents who had fled to Argentina. Uruguay's leftist President Tabare Vasquez praised the arrests, saying "the justice system has spoken."

But time is against the victims. Most of those who ordered the state-sponsored torture, murder and disappearances of political dissidents are in their 70s or older, as are many torture survivors.

Pinochet lived to 91. Paraguay's dictator Alfredo Stroessner died this year at 93 without being held to account. Because of his age, 84, former Mexican President Luis Echeverria will likely avoid trial for what the government report described as a campaign of "massacres, forced disappearances, systematic torture and genocide."

And in Brazil, the generals blamed for 450 deaths during their 19-year dictatorship have never been held responsible.

"Here, torturers of those still recent times are dying in their beds of old age," said Victoria Grabois, a leader of Torture Never Again in Brazil.

But former military rulers still have supporters across the region, and there's a danger of retribution even in places where courts function well.

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