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Chilean human rights group says abuses worst since dictatorship

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Santiago de Chile, December 25 (RHC)-- The repression of ongoing protests in Chile has resulted in the most serious human rights violations in 30 years since the country was ruled by the military dictatorship, warns the country's National Institute of Human Rights (NHRI).

According to the director of the country's official human rights body Sergio Micco, the state's response to the mass protests "produced, as a whole, the most serious and multiple violations of human rights committed since 1989."

In his annual report, focusing on the crisis that began in mid-October, Sergio Micco, details that the indiscriminate use of force, torture and sexual violence have been repeated in time and space during the current crisis. "This happened in democracy, in our democracy. How was it possible," he asked. "That is what this report is about, which we never thought we would have to write."

Massive demonstrations against the Chilean government began in Santiago on October 14 due to a 30-cent increase in the subway fare. While this measure was revoked by Piñera, social unrest increased in magnitude as the Chileans began to question "30 years" of neoliberal policies, which have implied a systematic withdrawal of economic and social rights for millions of people.

Since the start, the response of the security forces has been internationally condemned for its blatant disregard of human rights. Currently, prosecutors are investigating at least 26 deaths in the context of the crisis, including killings by the military and police forces.

The NHRI has visited thousands of protesters and bystanders who have been hospitalized, including more than 350 with eye injuries caused largely by police bullets.

NHRI describes human rights violations as "serious and multiple" and criticizes "excessive delay" by the Carabineros in taking measures to prevent further violations. The institute has initiated hundreds of legal actions

against the authorities for murder, torture, sexual violence, and other abuses.

Shortly after the NHRI submitted its report, Chilean President Sebastian Piñera gave a 29-minute speech at the presidential palace. He did not refer to the report, but instead mentioned in general terms the importance of "total, absolute and unrestricted respect for the human rights of all persons at all times, in all places and under all circumstances."

However, the government and security forces have framed these violations as isolated incidents of excess, vehemently rejecting international reports that claim otherwise. Despite condemnations by the United Nations and other international bodies, and the government's promises to respect human rights, police repression has been systematically violent, abusive, and indiscriminate.

According to Francisco Sepulveda, one of the doctors who treat voluntarily wounded protesters in Antofagasta, "it is repression at all costs," he told Al Jazeera, adding that the repression measures in the slums have been particularly violent.

Edited by Ed Newman

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