



For decades, Patio 29 was a mass grave for anonymous victims of the Pinochet dictatorship [EPA]

THE LONG SHADOW OF

GENERAL PINOCHET

Chile is trapped in a battle with a brutal past that has left its imprint of fear and violence deeply embedded in the Chilean psyche.



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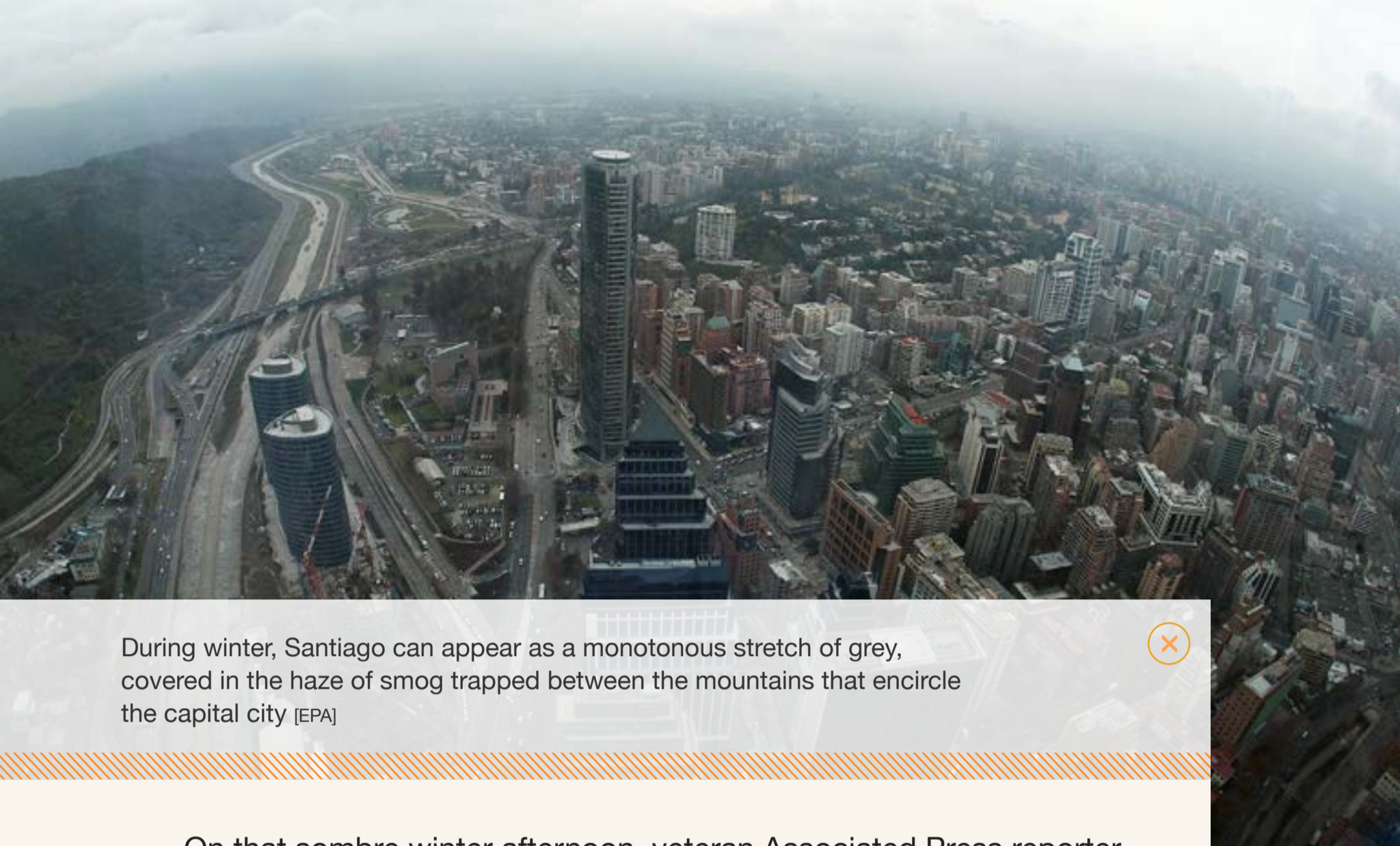
On winter days in the Chilean capital Santiago - which falls, harsh and stubborn, between June and August - the landscape is one monotonous stretch of grey: the sunless sky over concrete buildings and congested highways, the haze of smog trapped between the ashen mountains encircling the city. It is a pallor that extends from the tangible to the metaphorical.

One stark July afternoon in 2006, a few months before former dictator General Augusto Pinochet died, a colleague and I walked through the city's main cemetery. Outside the gates, florists sold ornate towers of whites, reds and yellows. But inside, past the ornate headstones and memorials, in a neglected and far-flung corner was an unusual national monument. For that was what the plot of dry grass and rusting iron crosses, known as Patio 29, had just been named by Chilean President Michelle Bachelet in recognition of the decades it had spent as a mass grave for an unknown number of Chileans murdered by Pinochet's military during the 1970s.

"The drama that we have confronted all of these years is the inheritance of a dictatorship, where there was silence, torture, concealment of information and abuse of human rights," said Bachelet, who was herself detained and tortured by the Pinochet regime. "There are still disappeared in our country, and as president I am taking on this open wound. Memory has no final end."

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During winter, Santiago can appear as a monotonous stretch of grey, covered in the haze of smog trapped between the mountains that encircle the capital city [EPA]



On that sombre winter afternoon, veteran Associated Press reporter Eva Vergara and I slowly picked our way past row after row of crooked headstones. For many years, they had been marked simply with an ‘NN’ for ‘no name’. Some of the victims were as young as 17. Eva barely spoke, her face contorted into a grimace.

Living under Pinochet’s rule - “decades of repression and dread, of sorrow and struggle,” as Chilean-American author Ariel Dorfman described it - created an intimacy with fear and suffering that remains painfully close today. Eva has listened to the stories of those tortured, to the family members of the murdered and ‘disappeared’ – people who, with few available outlets through which to share their experiences, are often unstoppable once they begin to talk. In all, more than 3,000 Chileans were murdered by the dictatorship – some were thrown naked into Santiago’s Mapocho River, others were dumped at sea, the exact fates of many others remain unknown.





Efforts have been made to identify the remains of bodies buried in Patio 29, but misidentification has regularly opened old wounds [EPA]



Today, 23 years after Pinochet ceded power (and 40 years after he seized it in a bloody coup), Chileans are still trapped in a battle with the trauma his 17-year reign wrought. It is a period that, to Chileans' chagrin, continues to define the country to the rest of the world, and its social impact can be felt on the streets and in homes.

“The dictatorship radically changed Chilean society,” says human rights organiser Rolando Jiménez. “It changed the social compass of Chilean society - it installed a profound individualism.”

My reporter friend Eva Vergara explains how, during the dictatorship, no one in Santiago could speak openly out of fear that somebody within earshot might report them. Even today, there are tangible traces of that wariness on the subway or in cafes; the sense that people have grown used to shutting themselves off as a form of self-preservation. And the legacy of secretiveness and violence is also reflected in Chile's high rates of domestic violence, femicide, hate attacks against gays and minorities, and the growth of neo-Nazi groups—all evidence, says Jiménez of the legacy of dictatorship.



Under Pinochet, deviation was punished, and acts as minor as men growing their hair long or women wearing miniskirts were deemed to be an offence. Today, Santiago remains one of the more culturally conservative capitals in Latin America, with little room to stray from the prescribed norm of a house, car and 2.3 children. It is only in the past three or four years, says Jiménez, that Chileans, young and old, have begun returning to the country's roots as a collective society. This, in turn, has led to growing politicisation after decades of political silence, which Jiménez hopes will break the cycle of ignoring the past that has typically defined Chilean society.

It is not just the scars of trauma that serve as a constant reminder of Pinochet for millions of Chileans. By the time Pinochet finally agreed to the possibility of relinquishing power in the late 1980s, he had already drastically altered Chile's political landscape, ensuring a stilted transition to democracy. Chief among his iron-fisted manoeuvres to protect himself and his military accomplices, Pinochet rewrote the law to prevent them facing legal repercussions for their human rights abuses. Then, in 1980, he ushered in a new constitution which legally legitimised military rule - a constitution that is, with few changes, today still the law of the land.

While Pinochet was voted out in 1990 and finally stepped down in 1991, he remained by constitutional decree the head of the armed forces until 1998 (when he was arrested in England under a Spanish warrant for human rights violations, although he never served any time in Chile or abroad).





Twenty-three years after Pinochet ceded power, Chileans have yet to fully recover from the 17 years of violent dictatorship they endured [EPA]

Despite more than 20 years of democracy, the country is still branded by changes made during the dictatorship: privatisation of the pension system, consolidation of media outlets into conservative monopolies, a semi-private and highly unequal public education system, a list of more international trade agreements than any other country in the world, and a free-market system which has made Chile one of the most stable nations in Latin America.

“No one is talking about changing the economic model, or Chile becoming Chavista,” says Rocío Montes, the author of a new book about this year’s two top presidential candidates. After all, the free market economy has brought advancement to Chile, with most Chileans saying that their lives are financially better than those of their parents’ Montes says - even if the country’s class schism has deepened along with the growing economy. “Chilean society wants more, and better, capitalism,” says Montes. “But without abuses, and with equality.”

With the country booming, Chileans say outsiders remain obsessed with Pinochet and that they wish the world would pay more attention to Chile for what the country has become since his rule ended.





In recent years, Chileans have grown increasingly socially active and politically aware, calling on politicians to do more to mend the country's income gap and its expensive privatised education and healthcare systems [EPA]



Yet, the line between actively moving forward and trying to forget the past is sticky. Nowhere is this more evident than at the graves of Patio 29.

Back in that grey corner of the capital, scores of victims still do not rest in peace. During the dictatorship a larger number of bodies were buried there, often stacked one on top of the other, inspiring Pinochet to boast “what great economising”. Then, somewhere down the line, some of the bodies were moved. Only the military perpetrators know to where. In the decades since democracy, Chilean forensic officials have repeatedly misidentified the DNA in the remains of bodies still buried at Patio 29, poking the unhealed wounds of dozens of families.



Regardless of Chile's economic progress, the years that pass since Pinochet's exit, or the number of leftist presidents elected, those wounds still demand urgent attention, as Bachelet herself admits. With former state torturers and murderers living free, while the victims of torture and the families of the dead and 'disappeared' continue to suffer, the country is stuck in a surreal inertia - simultaneously rushing to move forward to a brighter future while trapped reliving a dark past.

