

A change based on justice

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The Chilean Attorney General's Office is continuing investigations, seemingly now very seriously, into several current and former Chilean public officials including the former president Sebastián Piñera, the former General Director of the Carabineros (Chilean National police), Mario Rozas, and the current General Director under the administration of President Boric, Ricardo Yáñez, for their alleged actions or omissions during the police violence in the mass protests in 2019.

The inquiries are based on three charges: one for crimes against humanity and two others for generalized torture (unlawful coercion) against protesters during the period of social unrest. These investigations are in line with the findings of Amnesty International's report [*Eyes on Chile: Police violence and command responsibility during the period of social unrest*](#). At the time, Chile made world news for holding, in record time, the grim title of country with the highest number of people with eye injuries caused by police officers.

What started as isolated protests in Santiago very quickly turned into mass demonstrations throughout the whole country demanding quality education and public health, social security, and decent work. Social unrest that had been building up for decades exploded in an unexpected way. However, the actions of the police were even more unexpected.

Carabineros and the government of then President Sebastián Piñera made every effort to portray the demonstrations as acts of vandalism that warranted the use of force due to "[serious breach of the peace](#)" and "[attacks on public and private property](#)". The use of Molotov cocktails or stones against the police, despite the fact that these were isolated incidents, was the straw that the authorities grasped at in order to justify their repression. Social media was flooded with images of police violence that was clearly excessive.

Between 18 October and 30 November alone, at least three people were killed by state agents and the number of people treated in emergency departments reached 12,500, according to the Ministry of Health.

The Carabineros and the government decided to ignore the fact that international human rights law and Chilean national law prioritize the protection of people over the protection of material objects for one simple reason: the value of life is greater than the value of objects, which, unlike life, can be restored.

Disregarding that premise led to disaster, and the Attorney General's Office and the Judicial Branch may now consider this criminal conduct on the part of National Police commanders who allowed it to happen.

Among the most serious conduct attributed to the Chilean police, the use of shotguns loaded with highly injurious ammunition and concealed by the official narrative as 'rubber bullets' stood out. These were cartridges containing 12 pellets consisting of a rubber and metal alloy that penetrates the skin, which are impossible to aim and which the Carabineros fired indiscriminately. Rubber bullets,

the use of which should be exceptional, must always be directed at a single person and only if that person puts the life or safety of another person at risk.

Despite the evidence and the number of injuries increasing day by day, the authorities, including Carabinero commanders, wasted their breath insisting that the bullets they used were made of rubber, because that is how they appeared in the purchase orders. This is akin to claiming that a tiger is a cat simply because the person selling it says that it is.

One of the greatest tragedies was the number of people who suffered eye injuries, mostly due to this ammunition fired from Hatsan Escort shotguns. In a month and a half, almost 350 people, most of them young people, unjustifiably acquired a lifelong disability.

In a continent that has seen numerous outbursts of public unrest over the last five years as a result of disillusionment with leaders and their policies due to impunity, corruption, and lack of opportunity in the face of the wealth of the few, Chile could be the example that the Americas needs, proving that demanding rights is worth the effort and worthy of respect.

No society can move in the right direction without justice. To do so at the expense of the suffering of the victims would be to build change on shaky foundations. This is why, as part of this change, it is essential to make progress in the investigations and subsequent criminal proceedings against all those who may be responsible for the injuries, aftereffects, and the pain of so many others who fought to make Chile a better country.

In the report *Eyes on Chile*, Amnesty International called for the investigation of Carabinero strategic commanders, at least the then General Director, Deputy General Director and Director of Order and Security. The time has come for the Attorney General's Office to decide whether to apply, with sufficient and admissible evidence to do so, for indictment, and for justice to move forward.