

# The blinding of Gustavo Gatica and the return to unrestrained police state violence in Chile

By Mauricio Saavedra  
15 July 2020

Eight months after university student Gustavo Gatica was blinded by riot police, not one officer has been arrested. In the case of factory worker Fabiola Callimpai, who was nearly killed by the impact to the head of a teargas canister, the Carabineros have not made public which officers were involved. These two cases are representative of thousands of human rights abuses committed in Chile since the eruption of massive demonstrations against social inequality last year. They reveal a level of impunity not seen since the 17-year military dictatorship, when thousands were arrested, tortured, killed and disappeared.

On July 6, the Investigations Police (PDI) made a perfunctory promise to the Human Rights Commission of the lower house of Congress that investigations into the two cases would be concluded in the “following days.” The PDI has been promising this undertaking since prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus in March, but continues to drag its feet as human rights groups and investigative journalists publish further damning evidence. The PDI works in coordination with the civilian Public Prosecutor’s Office, a toothless body when it comes to prosecuting Carabineros.

“The police have an obligation to communicate the results in order to lower the perception of impunity,” PDI director general Héctor Espinosa told the parliamentary deputies. “We are committed to the truth ... I have absolute confidence that my institution will rise to the occasion in these two cases, because the country needs to know what happened.”

Espinosa seemingly convinced the parliamentary human rights commission and its president Emilia Nuyado (Socialist Party), who openly praised the institution.

No class-conscious worker, youth or student—those who have borne the brunt of escalating human rights abuses—has any expectation that the thoroughly corrupt and brutal state repressive apparatus, which acts in the service of corporate and financial ruling elites, will be brought to justice. The Carabineros are an autonomous military unit barely answerable to civilian bodies and have from the outset lied, obfuscated and withheld information in these cases, as in so many others before and after them.

At about 4 p.m. on November 8 of last year, Gustavo Gatica, a 21-year-old psychology student, was shot in the face by riot police while on Carabineros de Chile street. From a distance of no more than 30 metres, the special forces were indiscriminately firing rubber-coated lead pellets into hundreds of youth standing behind makeshift barricades.

Each cartridge releases 12 pellets. In the space of four hours, three high-ranking riot police used 420 cartridges, releasing a total of 5,040 pellets against the youth. This came to light only at the end of June because of leaked evidence, published by Amnesty International and other human rights and investigative organisations, revealing the identities of the three agents: Col. Santiago Saldivia, Lt. Col. Claudio Crespo and Lt. Col. Andrés Graves.

The Deputy Director General of the Carabineros, Inspector General Diego Olate, also addressed the deputies at last week’s parliamentary session exclusively to whitewash the crimes of his agents. Crespo, he said, “has an impeccable record, with commendations.” Olate added that he wanted to put on the record “that the disciplinary measures (against Crespo) are related to the breach of protocol” and not the injuries sustained by Gatica.

Olate was referring to the fact the institution had recently been impelled to remove Crespo because it had become public knowledge that the cop had attempted to hide his presence at the events of November 8—he downloaded his body camera onto his computer before submitting it to internal auditors. As a matter of fact, the auditors initially did not even take his deposition, even though he was a commanding officer and had personally fired 170 cartridges. More information has since come forward about this sadistic cop, who has a long history of violence and “systematic torture of minors,” according to one medic.

On the day of Gustavo Gatica’s blinding, the Medical Association and the Society of Ophthalmology released a chilling report stating that 176 people had suffered severe injuries to their eyes in the previous two weeks of protests. Sixty percent had severe decrease in vision, and 30 percent had been blinded in one eye. This is equal to more than two-thirds

of all eye injuries caused by “non-lethal” weapons in demonstrations or areas of conflict from 1990 to 2017.

The eruption of massive demonstrations on October 18, triggered by a public transport fare hike, was immediately met with unprecedented police state violence. The ultra-right administration of billionaire President Sebastian Piñera set in motion a series of draconian laws to outlaw protests and decreed for the first time in the 30 years of civilian rule a State of Constitutional Emergency. This allowed the military, Carabineros special forces and black berets to unleash a reign of terror.

“We are at war,” Piñera broadcast on live television. “We are at war with a powerful, ruthless enemy, who respects nothing and no one, who is willing to use violence and crime without any limits.” Piñera’s war was, and continues to be, against the working class, students and youth who have been at the receiving end of 50 years of social and political counterrevolutionary measures that have helped enrich the scions of Augusto Pinochet’s fascist civic-military dictatorship and created one of the most socially unequal countries in the world. Chile, the “paragon” of free market nostrums of the World Bank and the IMF imposed at the barrel of a gun, today boasts shantytowns amid condominiums, 25 percent unemployment amid 4,000 multi-millionaires and, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, collapsed public hospitals for the poor amid concierge clinics for the rich.

By November 26 of last year, the Chilean Institute of Human Rights reported that at least five people had died at the hands of the security forces and more than 2,300 had been injured, of whom more than 1,400 were wounded by firearms and 220 suffered severe eye trauma.

The Prosecutor’s Office recorded more than 1,100 complaints of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, as well as more than 70 crimes of a sexual nature committed by Carabineros. In the case of Josué Maureira, it reported that he had been raped with a cane while in police custody.

Meanwhile Amnesty International documented the practice of Carabineros and soldiers running over or attempting to run over protesters walking in the street on at least nine occasions in the cities of Colina, Quilpué, Santiago, Viña del Mar and Valparaíso.

“The use of tear gas in an inadequate manner and in alarming quantities... as well as in hospitals, universities, homes and even schools, seriously affecting children, adolescents and other populations that require special care,” reported the human rights organisation. “Its firing into the body of people at close range and through grenade launchers ... has generated severe injuries, including to the eyes.”

This is how Fabiola Campillai, 36 and the mother of three, was nearly killed by Special Forces in the working-class commune of Cinco Pinos in Greater Santiago on the evening of November 26. At 9 p.m., Fabiola and her sister Ana Maria

were heading to work at Carozzi S.A., a Chilean-based food processing company. As they turned onto Portales Avenue East, riot police fired a tear gas canister into Fabiola’s face from less than five metres.

Ana Maria screamed at the cops standing two metres away to help her sister to the hospital “She’s dying, she’s bleeding to death.’ I told them. They just shooed me away. They smiled and threw a tear gas canister at my feet.”

Fabiola has undergone multiple high-risk procedures to prevent cerebrospinal fluid seepage and has been left with scar running from one ear to the other. She lost, in addition to her sight, her senses of taste and smell.

Last week *La Tercera* released video footage from Capt. Jaime Fernández’ GoPro body camera where officers are heard saying, “He hit her, right?”, “Matu seems to have hit her, hit her with a ...” as a third shot was fired by Capt. Patricio Maturana Ojedabut.

Yet to date, no one has been charged. Public prosecutors have requested more time to investigate the case.

There is no tally of the total victims of the police state repression—the state’s own figures are a deliberate underestimation. Last March, the National Human Rights Institute issued a balance sheet indicating that 3,838 men, women and children were hospitalised due to severe injuries caused by bullet wounds, tear gas canisters and beatings. Of these, 460 suffered eye wounds. The NHRI recorded, during visits to police stations, the detention of 11,389 men, women, adolescents and children. Among those detained, 2,146 reported some kind of human rights violation: sexual violence (257); torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment (617); and excessive use of force (1,272).

The NHRI acknowledged that the figures do “not represent the universe of people injured since the social crisis, but is only a sample of cases observed or confirmed.”

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