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Former Chilean army chief General Juan Emilio Cheyre, during an official visit to India in 2005, has been arrested on charges of torturing prisoners under the Pinochet regime *Former Chilean army chief General Juan Emilio Cheyre, during an official visit to India in 2005, has been arrested on charges of torturing prisoners under the Pinochet regime*
AFP/File

Police in Chile arrested a former army chief Thursday on charges of torturing 24 people in 1973, shortly after the coup that brought dictator Augusto Pinochet to power, officials said.

Retired general Juan Emilio Cheyre had already been convicted last November and sentenced to three years under house arrest for his role in the killing of 15 people in the so-called "Caravan of Death," a unit sent out by Pinochet to murder left-wing opponents of his regime.

The latest torture charges stem from that case, and involve former prisoners who said they were tortured by Cheyre when he was an officer stationed in La Serena, 300 miles (480 kilometers) north of Santiago in 1973.

Cheyre served as commander-in-chief of the Chilean army from 2002-2006, long after Pinochet had been forced to relinquish power in 1990.

He and three other former officials reported to the human rights division of the police Thursday and were informed that they would be detained at an army base in the capital Santiago.

The men are accused of torturing prisoners being held at an army base. One of the accused, Cheyre's commander at the time, was ordered to be held under house arrest because of his age.

A judge ordered that Cheyre remain in custody, noting that he is accused of "various crimes as the direct author of the interrogations and torture."

Cheyre's lawyer, Jorge Bofill, said in a statement that "we categorically rejected the contents of the accusation, because Juan Emilio Cheyre never took part in the events set out there."

But families of the torture victims welcomed the move.

"Our relatives never killed anyone, they only thought in a different way to them. They are the ones who killed, tortured, abducted," said Marcos Barrantes, a relative of one of the people tortured.

During the Pinochet regime 3,200 Chileans were killed or were abducted and presumed dead, while another 38,000 were tortured, according to official figures. Pinochet died at the age of 91, in 2006.