

Chile floods expose lack of planning and infrastructure

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Severe floods throughout Chile over the last month have caused at least 17 deaths and forced an estimated 129,000 people into homelessness. Torrential rains affected the capital, Santiago, swamping more than 75 percent of metropolitan streets, including the city's main highway. The worst affected regions also included the central and southern regions, Chile's principal agricultural areas.

The floods are considered to be the worst in Chile for more than 20 years. Weeks of heavy rain caused major damage to infrastructure, mostly roads and bridges, with the cost estimated to be as high as US \$1.5 billion.

A state of emergency was declared in the Santiago metropolitan region. Schools were forced to close, train services were cancelled and electricity was cut to many areas due to high winds. Some areas of the city were at a virtual standstill as roads were blocked and bridges collapsed.

Many homes were wiped out as a result of the 90 kilometres per hour winds and the pouring rains, forcing thousands into shelters around Santiago. Most of the metropolitan homeless come from the poorest regions of Santiago, including Pudahuel, El Monte, Talagante, Isla de Maipo, Maipo and San Ramon.

A severe storm in the north of the country caused the suffocation deaths of five miners, who were left trapped in the mine due to a white wind (rain with snow).

Tens of thousands of people were left homeless in the south of the country, particularly the rural poor. Many live close to rivers that overflowed, wiping out their homes. They were forced to live in schools that were hastily turned into makeshift hostels. The government's response to the plight of the flood victims has been so inadequate that people have often returned to their waterlogged homes to try to dry them by burning coal.

An estimated US\$6.5 million in damage has been

caused to crops, irrigation systems and agricultural resources such as greenhouses and livestock in the south. Roads have been flooded, preventing the transport of feed for livestock, leaving animals to die of starvation.

The disaster has provided a damning exposure of the government headed by Ricardo Lagos, the first Socialist Party President since Salvador Allende was overthrown by General Augusto Pinochet's 1973 military coup.

In the first place, the only money that has been allocated to assist homeless flood victims has come from donations from the general public, paid into a Banco del Estado (State Bank) account. People have also been urged to donate blankets, clothes, non-perishable food and construction materials.

Secondly, while Lagos has made a show of concern for the homeless, visiting some of the most devastated suburbs of Santiago, he bears a direct responsibility for the disaster. Lagos was Minister for Public Works for six years under the previous Eduardo Frei government. In that capacity he permitted the infrastructure to avert flood disasters to become hopelessly inadequate.

As one parliamentary deputy revealed, only 40 percent of Santiago has rainwater channels. During Lagos' time as Minister, the government increased Santiago's housing areas from 2.7 to 14 million square metres without any similar expansion in the rainwater channel network. Cheap housing for the poor continued to be built closer to the Andes mountains, without storm water drainage facilities. These are the suburbs most affected by the latest flooding disaster. Furthermore, areas previously set aside for rainwater drainage were paved with concrete.

During the last major floods in Chile in 1997, the worst affected were those in government-built homes,

which could not cope with a major downpour. When floods hit in June of that year, as a cost cutting measure, the government contracted the private firm, Copeva, to repair homes. When floods hit again in August, the same homes were completely wiped out. Under huge public pressure, Minister Lagos was forced to admit that government housing was not prepared for the type of flooding that these areas experienced. He sought to blame the construction companies, however.

Today Lagos is taking a similar position, claiming that current laws fail to protect victims of badly-built houses. For instance, he visited 400 homeless families in Maipu, a poor district, who were angry about their conditions and the lack of government response. He declared that irresponsible construction companies were at fault, and that the government wanted to introduce a law to protect consumers.

This is a diversion from the fact that the government itself is responsible for the lack of planning and insufficient infrastructure funding. Not only that, it was the government that hired the construction companies in the first place.

This housing disaster is part of a wider picture. Over the past decade, Chile's economy has been based on a massive privatisation program. The benefits of this program have gone to tiny elite layer, while the working people have had to contend with downsizing, restructuring, the elimination of public facilities and the lowering of living standards.

The floods—and the Lagos government's reaction—show that this pattern is continuing. Declarations by Lagos at his inauguration earlier this year, that ordinary people would enjoy reforms in housing and infrastructure have been proven completely fraudulent.



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