

Chile earthquake death toll tops 700

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The worst earthquake in Chile in 50 years has killed at least 700, and the death toll continues to rise. Many more are still missing, tens of thousands have been wounded, and 1.5 million homes have been destroyed.

The earthquake, which struck early Saturday morning, was centered about 70 miles (110 kilometers) from Concepción, Chile's second-largest city, with half a million inhabitants. The massive earthquake measured 8.8 and lasted for about three minutes. It took most people by surprise as they slept.

The government has responded by deploying the military, which has taken control of Concepción in response to social unrest and looting.

The earthquake impacted a broad section of the South American country, causing major damage in the capital of Santiago. It could be felt as far as Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1,800 miles away.

Much of the death and destruction was centered in coastal towns, hit by both the earthquake and a subsequent tsunami. Government officials originally downplayed the threat of a tsunami, and Defense Minister Francisco Vidal acknowledged on Sunday that this was "a mistake."

At the mouth of the Maule River, 510 kilometers (300 miles) south of Santiago, giant waves entered the river and wiped out a town. "The damage is immense, hundreds of homes are no longer there," declared an eyewitness.

Many cities are isolated as a consequence of the destruction of roads, bridges and rail lines. Electric service in the affected regions has been disrupted or is erratic. Train stations sustained damages, and hundreds

of rail cars were knocked off their tracks.

While Chilean building construction codes are designed to prevent collapses, many were unable to withstand the strength of this earthquake, particularly more poorly built structures in working class areas.

The region hit by the quake is part of the Pacific Rim's "Ring of Fire," where a tectonic plate under the Pacific Ocean dives under the South American continent. By some measures, Saturday's quake ranks as the 6th strongest on record. It took place 140 kilometers north of Valdivia where, on May 22, 1960 the strongest earthquake ever recorded (magnitude 9.5) took place. That quake killed 1,655 people and left 2 million homeless.

Worldwide, Chile's earthquake was the strongest since the December 2004 quake off the Coast of Indonesia that created a massive tsunami, responsible for the death of 220,000 people. The earthquake in Chile was far stronger than the January 12 earthquake in Haiti (magnitude 7.0). Due to the more concentrated impoverishment of Haiti, however, the death toll there was far higher (at least 233,000).

The quake also exposed the conditions of economic and social inequality that are endemic to this South American nation. In the Santiago working class neighborhood of Estación Central, home for Peruvian immigrant workers, many families lost all their belongings as walls and homes collapsed.

In Concepción, the death and destruction had a disproportionate effect on the poorest neighborhoods. On Sunday there were shortages of water, electricity, and fuel. No government help had yet arrived.

Public hospitals, many of which already operated at full capacity, were overwhelmed over the weekend by injured patients. Some hospitals had to be shut down due to the damage that they sustained. Such was the case with the public hospital in the city of Talca.

President Michelle Bachelet declared a “state of catastrophe” for five Chilean regions, including the capital city, Santiago. Bachelet emphasized that the government was prepared to assume extraordinary powers.

In Santiago, hungry and thirsty people resorted to distributing among themselves supplies from the Líder supermarket (owned by Wal-Mart), a direct consequence of the slow government response. People took basic foodstuffs such as milk, sugar, rice, diapers, and water. Similar actions took place in Concepción and other cities affected by the earthquake. Media reports cited one looter: “People have gone days without eating. The only option is to come here and get stuff for ourselves.”

The Bachelet administration angrily denounced these citizens and sent police and military against them. On Sunday evening a “state of siege” was declared for Concepción and a curfew was imposed. The military has been placed in charge in sections of the city.

President Elect Sebastián Peñera, who will assume office on March 11, has called on Bachelet to use the full force of the military to stop looting and protect businesses. “We have to make use of all our resources, and our armed forces are ready to help in times of crisis and catastrophes,” he said in a statement. He declared that he had ordered his transition team to meet with officials of the current administration to create a seamless reconstruction plan.



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