

As death toll from quake, tsunamis mounts

## Massive military mobilization in Chile

Patrick Martin  
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Chilean President Michelle Bachelet ordered another 7,000 troops into the two provinces hardest hit by Saturday's earthquake. The move doubled the total number of troops mobilized in the central coastal region around the city of Concepción, the country's second largest.

Bachelet's action came as first reports from the coastal towns, which were hit in succession by the earthquake and then by as many as five post-quake tsunamis, suggested that the death toll would go much higher than the official figure of 795. According to one report, a Google application set up to locate missing people had already registered 39,000 names.

Half of the acknowledged dead were from the town of Constitución, along the coast north of Concepción, near the epicenter of the quake. There was little left of the town, which was home to 50,000 people before the catastrophe, and there are likely hundreds more bodies still to be found under the rubble, or swept out to sea.

According to survivors, the town was struck first by the quake, and then by a series of tsunamis, the largest of them as high as 50-feet, which wiped out the business district along the shore of the Pacific Ocean. The town was full of tourists visiting a local summer festival when the quake hit.

Only those who fled the coastline in the first hours after the early-morning quake could have survived the surging waters. Eyewitness reports said that the only buildings to remain intact were on the hills above the town. Rows of bodies lined the floor a local high school gym, where relatives sought to make identification. As many as 500 people are reported missing in Constitución alone.

General Bosco Pesse, head of emergency operations in Maule province, which includes Constitución, told

the French news agency AFP, "The tsunami affected 200 kilometers of coastline, at places sweeping 2,000 meters inland." He said the death toll in Maule province alone would likely exceed 1,000.

A police official said at least 62 bodies were recovered from the towns of Curanipe, Chanco and Pelluhue, where a tour bus filled with elderly people was swept into the ocean. "There are still hundreds of missing," he said.

In the city of Talcahuano, with a population of 180,000, 80 percent of the people are believed homeless and 10,000 homes are not habitable. Mayor Gaston Saavedra told the press, "The port is destroyed. The streets, collapsed. City buildings, destroyed."

The Chilean Navy has come in for widespread criticism because it did not immediately send out a tsunami warning after the quake hit, which could have alerted coastal populations and saved lives.

Alejandra Jara, a young woman from La Pesca, a fishing village near Constitución, told the British Broadcasting Service, "Nobody showed up around here to warn us. We fled on our own because we know that when there's a big earthquake, you have to leave everything and take off."

Manuel Parra, 64, told the BBC, "Those who went inland up the hill survived. Those who didn't are no longer here."

The Navy's failure was especially deadly for residents of the islands of Juan Fernández (Robinson Crusoe), 415 miles west of the mainland, which were hit by tsunamis estimated at 30-feet high. There local residents did not feel the earthquake, and the tidal waves struck without warning about 6 a.m. local time, sweeping over coastal settlements, dislodging houses and boats and then pulling them back out into the Pacific. There is no count yet of deaths among the 800

residents and tourists believed to be on the islands at the time of the quake.

In Concepción, a city of 600,000, nearly every structure has been damaged, and many people are believed still buried in the ruins. Most of the city is without electricity and running water. Thousands of survivors of the earthquake broke into stores seeking food and other essential supplies.

The main focus of local, regional and national authorities has been to restore order and defend private property against alleged looting. The mayor of Concepción, Jacqueline van Rysselberghe, appealed to the national government to suppress anarchy in the streets. "Send the largest number of troops possible," she pleaded.

President Bachelet, a Social Democrat, ordered troops to conduct patrols in civilian neighborhoods for the first time since the end of the Pinochet military dictatorship in 1990. Addressing the population of Concepción, she warned, "We understand your urgent suffering, but we also know that these are criminal acts that will not be tolerated."

Just as in Haiti's earthquake in January, law-and-order measures have taken precedence over humanitarian concerns. According to the British news service, "A BBC reporter in Concepción says police are now posted on street corners in the city centre, but says that aid convoys are yet to reach the needy."

The same priority of repression over aid is reflected in the international response to the quake. The Chilean government did not initially request any assistance, suggesting that it could handle rescue and recovery operations on its own. Once it reversed itself and appealed for aid, the response was derisory. China offered \$1 million, Japan \$4 million.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrived on a previously scheduled visit with 25 satellite telephones, one of which she handed with a flourish to President Bachelet, who met her at the Santiago airport.

Bachelet is scheduled to leave office March 11, handing over power to the president-elect, Sebastian Pinera, a conservative billionaire. Pinera expressed concern for the political aftershocks of the disaster. "When we have a catastrophe of this magnitude, when there is no electricity and no water, the population...starts losing the sense of public order," he said.

The country's leading daily *El* newspaper, noted that the possibility of a "social explosion" was emerging as the government's "worst fear." It commented that there were anxious deliberations in the government before the order was given to send in the troops and impose dusk to dawn curfews, because of the bitter experience of two decades of military dictatorship.

Bachelet's spokeswoman Pilar Armanet sought to address popular concerns, saying, "Coordination between civilian and military authorities is functioning correctly."

In an op-ed column in the *New York Times* Tuesday, Chilean author Alberto Fuguet observed, "The real tremor rumbling beneath the rubble is the threat of social upheaval, especially in Concepción and Talcahuano, where ships lie in the streets."



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