

Military occupation of earthquake-ravaged region expands in Chile

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So far some 800 bodies have been recovered of those killed by the initial earthquake and tsunamis in Chile. In Concepción, which on Wednesday was shaken by a major aftershock—it measured 5.8 on the Richter scale—and so far has been hit by three tsunamis. Officially, there are only 19 missing in Concepción, but the unofficial estimate is 500.

Ten hospitals have been destroyed in the affected regions. Potable water is scarce and electric service is erratic even in parts of Santiago. Incessant aftershocks have damaged highways and bridges beyond the initial quake. Highway crews report that new cracks appear as soon as old ones are fixed.

The most seriously affected zone was that of Maule, with 587 dead. Bío Bío had 92 dead, with 48 in O'Higgins, 38 in the Santiago area, 20 in Valparaíso and 14 in Araucanía.

A photograph on the front page of Wednesday's *New York Times* speaks volumes. It shows two Chilean soldiers standing over two working-class youth with their rifles on their back. The caption ominously reads "establishing order and looking ahead in Chile." The message that the government of social-democratic President Michelle Bachelet delivers in this way to Chile's workers and poor is that the government intends to preemptively repress any possibility of a popular rebellion.

Concepción, with more than half a million inhabitants, after Santiago the second largest city in Chile, is now occupied by over 14,000 troops. On March 2nd the state of siege imposed on Concepción and other cities was extended to two other coastal

cities, Curicó and Talca.

As a result of the government imposed 18-hour curfew, people are only allowed out six hours per day. Concepción Mayor Jacqueline Van Ryssenberghé declared that the distribution of supplies would "prioritize those neighborhoods that did not participate in the looting," in effect imposing a collective punishment on the more rebellious working class areas of the city.

Despite extensive evidence to the contrary, desperate citizens, short of food, water and basic necessities are branded as "looters and vandals" by government officials, a lie that is being zealously promoted by the mass media.

One salient example is CNN Latinoamérica, an agency that provided a platform for Van Ryssenberghé, a supporter of the right-wing nationalist Independent Democratic Union, who continuously called on Bachelet to send in more troops and encouraged the formation of vigilante groups. CNN repeatedly broadcast her message to the exclusion of many other reports, without mentioning Van Ryssenberghé's reactionary politics.

In reality the so-called looters are confronting an extreme situation and, in many cases have run out of options. While supplies are gradually arriving to big cities like Concepción, a correspondent indicated in a letter to the *World Socialist Web Site* that cities such as Talcahuano have not received supplies at all.

However, she points out that the Chilean military has no problem moving thousands of troops about:

“Supermarkets are open, but this does not help, when there is no cash, no system for credit cards. People have to pay for supplies in this extraordinary disaster...the earthquake took place on the last Saturday of February, so people are additionally short of cash money.”

Many coastal towns have been destroyed and require immediate supplies. Large markets and pharmacies in Concepción survived but were closed by their capitalist owners, who, unable to process credit and debit cards, simply refused to distribute foodstuffs and resorted to hoarding. An occupying army is now protecting these establishments from so-called looters.

One periodical reported, “people waited 48 hours” in Concepción for these establishments to open before taking matters in their own hands. The report refers to the obvious, that once inside, some people made off with shoes, electric appliances and TV sets. In the context of Chile’s social and economic inequality, such actions were inevitable.

The failure of infrastructures, roads, water supply, electricity and the collapse of many newer buildings are a direct result of the free-market policies imposed by the Pinochet dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s, policies that have continued to this day. Strict building codes that had been imposed in the wake of the earthquake of May 1960 were relaxed, in line with the ideology that markets are efficient and that the profit motive is sufficient enforcement of building standards.

Many of these newer structures have not yet fallen, but they are at risk of collapsing; in Bío Bío alone that includes at least 17 apartment buildings. The Chilean government estimates that 1.5 million homes have collapsed or are severely damaged.



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