

Strong earthquake shakes Chile

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On the evening of Tuesday April 1, an earthquake shook the territory of Arica and Parinacota northern Chile, 1600 kilometers (900 miles) north of Santiago. The earth movement's epicenter was in the Pacific Ocean, off the coast of the copper and fishing port of Iquique.

The tremor measured 8.2 on the Richter scale and occurred at 8:47 pm. It was followed by a series of less intense quakes. Six people died; three others were severely injured. Nearly one million were evacuated, as 2.5-meter tsunami waves hit the coast, damaging fishing boats and ports.

Electricity service was cut in the Chilean cities of Tarapacá, Mejillones, and Antofagasta. It has yet to be fully restored. Eight highways were damaged and agricultural communities were left isolated by mudslides. The supply of potable water to cities in the region is also compromised.

Evacuations also took place on the southern Peruvian coast. Electrical blackouts occurred in the Peruvian cities of Tacna, Moquegua and Arequipa. In Ecuador, fishing vessels were advised not to venture out in coastal waters.

Security forces were sent into the copper ports of Iquique and Arica in anticipation of potential looting.

Tuesday's quake affected the center of Chile's copper mining. Though it was nearly an order of magnitude less strong than an apocalyptic one in 2010, and in a less populated region, it had an impact on world copper prices. Wednesday they rose to their highest in three weeks as several copper ports remained shut. While none of the mines reported damages from the tremor itself, copper production was affected by the loss in electricity. It is expected that over the next few weeks, mine safety inspections will also have a negative impact on production.

Exposing Chile's social divide, it was the poor who were most severely affected by the quake. In Iquique, a

coastal city of 180,000, many fishermen lost all their boats and their means to a livelihood. Fishermen have banded together in an attempt to salvage what they can.

The damage to homes was also substantial, particularly in poor neighborhoods. TV images showed cracked and fallen walls, and structural damages to homes. Thousands of homes were damaged by the initial quake. South of Iquique, in Alto Hospicio (100,000 inhabitants), 2,500 homes were left fully or partially destroyed, including a new government housing project that opened this year. The destruction impacted mostly the impoverished residents of that town.

Former presidential candidate and tenant advocate Roxana Miranda called on newly installed President Michelle Bachelet to speed up aid to Alto Hospicio. She warned of the potential for a "social explosion."

"People are right to feel cheated and they are angry. They see nobody stepping up and advocating breaking their isolation... they do not see anyone doing anything about the price gouging that is on the rise. For the government Alto Hospicio is a community of poor people who will have to suck it up. People are beginning to organize... this situation cannot be solved with troops," said Miranda.

David Maldonado, an Alto Hospicio social advocate, denounced Bachelet for overflying Alto Hospicio without landing there. "We have no water, no electricity, food prices have tripled. City Hall is padlocked. People will rise up at any moment, because it is becoming clear that the those that most need help are not getting it," said Maldonado.

The aftershocks continued on Thursday, including one that measured 7.6 on the Richter scale at midnight that activated new tsunami alerts. Social tensions are on the rise. Inhabitants, worried over their homes, over blocked roads and over the delay in restoring public services are demanding a more rapid response from

government authorities.

The Chilean government attempted to give the quake a positive spin. President Bachelet visited the region accompanied by some members of her cabinet. At a press conference in the city of Iquique, she lauded the efforts of the emergency teams, which “made it possible to avoid major disruptions,” she said. Commenting on the isolated agricultural towns, Bachelet indicated, “They are most affected because of big mudslides. We have machinery in place but we will need more time.”

Undoubtedly, Bachelet was anxious to avoid a repetition of her government’s poor response to the 2010 earthquake at the end of her first term in office. The president came under heavy criticism over the government’s response to the 8.8 earthquake that struck central Chile in February of that year, with some 700 deaths. The administration failed to warn about a tsunami wave that struck along 400 kilometers of the central coast. Twenty-meter waves swept away boats, homes, and entire towns.



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