

Violent fire hits Valparaiso, Chile

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Saturday evening a forest fire spread into populated areas in Valparaiso, Chile, a port city of 300,000 inhabitants. As these lines are being written nine bodies have been found. Another seven are presumed dead, including one child, and another 500 are injured. Two thousand homes have been destroyed, and 10,000 people have been evacuated. President Michelle Bachelet declared a disaster emergency. It is likely that the number of casualties will increase when the fire is completely extinguished and the rescue effort ends.

The fires originated on the Valparaiso hills, impacting the heavily urbanized hills of Mariposas, El Vergel, San Roque, La Cruz, and Las Cañas.

This tragic firestorm was an event waiting to happen.

Almost exactly one year ago, on April 23, 2013, a fast moving forest fire ascended the El Vergel hill and burned 30 homes in Mariposas. The fire came on the heels of a February fire in nearby Rodelillo that burned 284 homes. In 2008 a fire in La Cruz burned 19 homes.

At the time of the 2008 fire, authorities had warned that there was a high probability for other fires of this kind. “We had warned that a repeat fire was very probable,” said Valparaiso manager Raúl Celis, due to changing environmental conditions. “Those of us that have been born and raised here understand that things have changed, we suffer from a ferocious erosion; the fire was boxed in and guided up the slope by the winds,” seconded Mayor Jorge Castro.

Typical of the hills impacted by this weekend’s fire, Mariposas is an overcrowded working class neighborhood of older homes, with few public spaces and narrow streets. In 2012 it came under the government housing restoration and social investment program that was woefully underfunded.

According to a report by the housing rights NGO “A roof for Chile” (*Un techo para Chile*), Valparaiso faces a severe housing shortage, and El Vergel is one of the iconic examples of Valparaiso’s crisis. Many of the

working class residents set up “camp” on this hill and have been waiting for years for promised housing and for housing vouchers with which to formalize their situation. Some of the residents in this and other Valparaiso camps are dependent on a weekly water delivery by tank trucks, and on electricity intercepted from nearby power lines.

San Roque is one of the most scenic hills in Valparaiso, with a view of the Pacific Ocean. On January 1, a fire in San Roque destroyed 15 homes and victimized 42 residents. Several fires took place in Valparaiso that day, raising the suspicion that, for San Roque at least, this was a way of clearing the area for the building of more profitable housing and hotels. Parts of this hill also depend on trucked-in potable water.

The absence of reliable piped-in water, combined with the steepness of the terrain, has forced the fire fighters to take to the air.

Weather conditions are further complicating the work of firefighters: strong winds are blowing over the city, like the ones that initially sparked the firestorm. Valparaiso is also suffering from unusually high temperatures (it is autumn in the Southern Hemisphere.)

At 10:30 p.m. on Saturday, president Bachelet declared a state of emergency over all of Valparaiso. Bachelet had issued a similar decree for northern Chile when an earthquake struck two weeks ago.

A state of emergency in Chile gives the military broad powers over the civilian population. A committee consisting of Chile’s defense minister, Jorge Burgos; the head of the Emergency Management Bureau, Ricardo Toro; and Interior Minister Rodrigo Peñailillo was also appointed to “take all necessary measures to control the fire, and to maintain public security and order,” said Peñailillo.

These measures to “maintain order” go beyond the

present tragedy. Valparaiso is virtually bankrupt and has been selling off city assets and threatening to shut down part of its public education system. An attempt to shut down schools two years ago was abandoned last month in the face of vigorous popular opposition.

On Sunday, a force of 3,500 fire fighters, 12 helicopters and three airplanes were still fighting the blaze. Two thousand soldiers were patrolling the streets.

City shelters and churches reported being overwhelmed by the refugees from the fire, as were area hospitals.

As with the earthquake that shook the city of Iquique and Northern Chile two weeks ago, the Valparaiso fire reveals underlying social deterioration, in this case the crisis of housing in many of the city's neighborhoods, coupled with environmental changes that with more frequency are spreading forest fires into Valparaiso.



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