

Massive earthquake hits Chile

Cesar Uco
18 September 2015

At least 11 people were killed and over a million were forced to leave their homes when an 8.4 magnitude earthquake lasting more than three minutes struck off the Pacific coast of Chile at around 8 p.m. local time Wednesday night. The epicenter was Ilapel, Coquimbo, located 275 km northwest of Santiago. Within an hour of the big earthquake, there were five aftershocks in the same geographical area, ranging in magnitude from 5.7 to 6.4.

On the day of the massive quake, there were three previous earthquakes of magnitude 4.6 to 5, all in another epicenter near the northern city of Tarapaca. In the last 13 days, 19 earthquakes of magnitude 4 or more have been recorded throughout Chile's coastal region, spanning from Tarapaca in the north to Bio-Bio located to the south of Santiago. One earthquake was registered in Comodoro Rivadavia, Argentina, near the Patagonia region, and another in Moquegua, Peru, close to the border with Chile

With the exception of two of the earthquakes, all of the epicenters were offshore and less than 30 km deep. The last four occurred at a depth of around 15 km.

The Chilean daily *La Tercera* reported, "Waves of up to five meters [over 16 feet] have affected the coasts ... Thousands of people have evacuated the zones close to these in 14 regions of the country. There were highway problems and the flooding of streets. In Tongoy, the waves advanced 500 meters and cut off part of the peninsula, which is an hour from Coquimbo."

Valparaiso residents reported that the army had taken over the port and forced people to take to high ground. Pandemonium reigned with lines of cars going uphill, children crying and tourists paralyzed by fear.

The WSWs interviewed by phone Wednesday night a young musician from Valparaiso, Rafael. He said, "Many people are concerned that they will not be allowed to go back to their homes and will have to

spend the night in the surrounding hills".

"The general mood is confusion and being annoyed of the way the military is behaving," he added. "Each time there is a tremor, sirens go off and the army takes over the streets, controlling the main avenues; exercising techniques of crowd control."

Rafael reported that the sea had risen at Viña del Mar, but that the wealthy resort city was saved because the water entered through the Marga Marga estuary.

"The worst hit," said Rafael, "are the small fishing towns because, as opposed to Viña del Mar, they lack protective infrastructure." Among these were the fishing towns of La Caleta, Concon and Reñaca, near Valparaiso, where the ocean had flooded the streets.

Rafael also reported that "there was a sense of invasion of privacy" after the government used telecommunications networks to unilaterally access all cellular phones to deliver presidential warnings of tsunamis. "Within minutes, I received dozens of government messages," he said.

The Socialist Party-led government of President Michelle Bachelet, facing charges of corruption, low approval ratings, and a rapid deceleration of the economy, is acutely aware that such a natural disaster has the potential of triggering intense social unrest.

Bachelet was president in February 2010, when a magnitude 8.8 quake and an ensuing tsunami in central Chile killed more than 500 people and destroyed 220,000 homes. The catastrophe heightened political and social tensions amid bitter recriminations against the government for prematurely lifting a tsunami warning and telling people it was safe to return to their coastal homes, as well as its inadequate relief efforts afterwards.

In the election of that year, the candidate of Bachelet's Concertacion coalition, Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei, lost to right-wing billionaire Sebastian Piñera, bringing the heirs of the Pinochet dictatorship

back to power for the first time in 20 years.

Also affected by Wednesday's earthquake was copper production, a key foundation of Chile's economy. Two major copper mines operated by Codelco and Antofagasta were shut down in the aftermath of the quake, briefly driving up the price of copper on the world markets.

Chile is overwhelmingly dependent on sales of copper to China, which have plummeted. On the day of the quake, the Chilean daily *Mercurio* led with the headline: "Fall in the price of copper provokes historic fall in mining profits."

Last week, the CTC (Confederation of Copper Workers) bureaucracy suspended a 22-day strike at the giant state-owned copper corporation, Codelco, by 45,000 copper workers, who work for a contractor, receiving only 70 percent of the salaries of the 20,000 workers on Codelco's payroll along with inferior benefits. The union called off the strike without winning a single demand, saying it was going back into negotiations.

The strike is part of growing social conflict pitting the working class against the Socialist Party-led government, signaling a sharp change in the emerging class struggle in Chile.

Two years ago, a yearlong strike by hundreds of thousands of high school and university students undermined the government of right-wing President Piñera, helping Bachelet come back into power.

Chile lies at the southeast corner of what is called the "ring of fire" surrounding the Pacific Ocean, where earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are prevalent. It begins in the southern tip of Chile and runs up the coast of the Americas all the way to Alaska, continuing along the Pacific coast of Asia. Together with the Chilean coast, the other notoriously dangerous areas are the San Andreas fault in California and the island nation of Japan.

What is remarkable about the series of tremors hitting Chile in the last two weeks is that they took place throughout the length of Chile's 2,000-km coast.

Chile is one of the countries most susceptible to earthquakes because just off its coast, the Nazca tectonic plate is sinking under the South American plate. Through tens of millions of years this process created the Andes, the longest mountain chain in the world—second tallest after the Himalayas—running

parallel to the Pacific Ocean through Chile, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia.

The worst earthquake in history took place in the southern Chilean city of Valdivia in 1960, killing more than 5,000 people. It reached a magnitude of 9.5 on the Richter scale, which is equivalent to 178 gigatons of power and comparable to 1,000 atomic bombs going off at the same time.



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