

Forest fires kill at least 26 in Chile

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At least 26 people have lost their lives to catastrophic fires that are sweeping through central-southern Chile with no end in sight. Over 280 active fires are blazing in the regions of Maule, Ñuble, Biobío and La Araucanía, 350km to 700km south of Santiago, regions that are dominated by agribusinesses and millions of hectares of pine and eucalyptus plantations.

Wildfires have also broken out in the deep south of Los Ríos and Los Lagos, and in Valparaíso to the north of the capital.

Over the weekend, Minister of the Interior Carolina Tohá placed Ñuble, Biobío and La Araucanía under States of Catastrophe, which allows for the deployment of the Armed Forces into the zones.

Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Spain, Venezuela and other countries have responded to the call for help and are sending fire brigades, specialists and equipment.

A debilitating 14-year drought caused by climate change, criminally reckless forestry industry activity, unusually high temperatures and strong Patagonian winds have created the perfect conditions for the environmental disaster unfolding in Chile.

The devastating fires have already burnt through approximately 200,700 hectares according to preliminary estimates of the National Forestry Corporation (CONAF). They've predominantly ravaged enormous privately-owned plantations, pine and eucalyptus plantations that have been allowed to encroach into populated spaces where today they buttress homes, farms, indigenous communities, villages, towns and even regional cities.

These are the people being directly affected. Twenty-six people have perished in the space of a week, including a volunteer fire fighter, Yesenia Muñoz, who died while on active duty, as well as a firefighting pilot and a helicopter mechanic. Over 1,550 houses have been destroyed by the fires affecting some 3,300 people.

The death toll surpasses the forest fires of 2014 in the densely populated Valparaíso region, which killed 15, injured over 500, and destroyed more than 2,900 homes.

It also looks likely to surpass the 2017 forest fires, until

then the worst in recent history. Some 467,000 hectares went up in flames. The tragic incident left 11 dead and localities such as Santa Olga were razed to the ground. 1,600 homes were set ablaze by fires that advanced at 8,240 hectares per hour.

In a sickening twist, the focus of the administration of pseudo-left President Gabriel Boric has been to lay responsibility on the population at large and ignore the elephant in the room. The government, assisted by the corporate media, have desperately sought to avoid any mention of the timber industry.

In announcing the deployment of the military, Interior Minister Tohá told a press conference that "an important part of the work that the armed forces and the forces of order is to have patrols to avoid risky situations. To avoid behaviors that could generate new fires..."

Prompted by a CNN reporter if she was aware of any intentionally lit fires, Tohá responded that while they are investigating cases, "we do know that 99 percent of fires are generated by human action whether voluntary or involuntary ... So, regardless of what the investigations tell us, what we can say is there was human action behind it, that it was avoidable with precaution, and the insistence today is to concentrate on that because the vast majority of fires are caused by this type of reason."

This servility to corporate interests has only emboldened the timber magnates. On February 4, the president of the Chilean Timber Corporation, Juan José Ugarte, alleged that the fires were intentional and menacingly called for the militarization of the entire central-southern territory.

"The capacities are at the limit, and for that reason it is vital to use the tools that the State of Exception allows, because it is required in some communes to establish curfews, prohibition of circulation of people, prohibition of the sale of fuel in drums, to not have accelerant vehicles that spread fires, establish control points of routes, among others, to give security to the neighbors and prevent people from continuing to cause fires," Ugarte said.

Nonetheless, it has proved impossible to shut out the growing voices of anger representing the hundreds of thousands of families directly and indirectly affected by the yearly occurrence of bush fires that are widely believed to be the work of the forestry companies themselves to acquire more land—in 2021, seven Forestal Arauco brigadiers were arrested for intentionally lighting fires that burnt 15,000 hectares in Radal Siete Tazas National Park.

One fisherman from Punta Lavapié, a cove in the Gulf of Arauco, Biobío, interviewed by Megavisión demanded that forestry companies stop planting trees so close to their homes. “To all the private companies that continue planting near our homes, our coves and our workplaces. We are all artisanal fishermen and we are not going to leave here. You can't plant your resources so close to us,” he told a surprised reporter who quickly diverted the discussion to the cleanup efforts of the residents.

About 35 houses of the coastal village were razed to the ground. All the residents were forced to evacuate by sea on boats supplied by the local fishermen and by the Navy because plantations adjacent to the small village blocked all possibility of escaping by land.

In another interview, the mayor of the rural municipality of Santa Juana unwittingly criticized the government's subservience to the timber magnates in the Biobío region.

Santa Juana, which sits between the Wood Route and the Biobío River and is where the fires crossed to other locations, found itself surrounded by fire on all sides. Ten residents have lost their lives and 50 percent of the rural homes have gone up in flames.

The mayor, Ana Alborno, (who happens to be allied with the current administration of the pseudo-left president Gabriel Boric) told the media, “The first shelter we had, the school of Colico Alto, we lost. We lost the health care center in the sector, we have no possibility of providing health care for the neighbors affected in the rural area. We are evacuating the sector of Los Castaños, because the fire, in addition to expanding towards Santa Juana, is spreading towards rural sectors of the municipality.”

She continued, “We are unable to cope. We are alone. There is an abandonment by the State of Chile. There is no plan for plantations, we need it to be regulated and that was not done by the State. The legislation we have is horrible, it does not protect us. The Biobío Region is entirely planted with (pines). Sometimes it seems that only Providencia, Las Condes and big cities matter, but not the communities that feed our country.”

Many thousands more have turned to social media to air their anger at the current and past governments which have bent over backwards to help the timber industry magnates, beginning with the military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

Pinochet brought in decree law 701 in 1974, which subsidized 75 percent of the cost of pine plantations, and in 1980 brought in the Water Code, which allowed for the private ownership of water. From 1974 to the present, Arauco (owned by the Angelini Group) and CMPC (Matte Group) had received US \$1billion from public funds and own close to 2 million hectares of land combined.

To create a propitious climate for the expansion of the industry, the dictatorship removed indigenous Mapuche communities from ancestral lands at the point of a gun. It also rescinded the land seizures of the 1960s and 1970s, handing them back to latifundistas, while brutally repressing left-wing peasant organizations.

With the return to civilian rule in 1990, alternating Christian Democratic, Socialist Party and right-wing governments have applied “anti-terrorist” and “state security” laws against Mapuche communities, which have turned increasingly to armed struggle to reclaim their ancestral lands. Meanwhile politicians of all stripes have been mired in one corruption scandal after another involving the oligarchic families of Chile.

Today President Boric, promoted as a “progressive,” “environmentalist,” “feminist” by liberals and the pseudo-left, is continuing in line with his predecessors.



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