

Migrants caught between troop deployments along Chile-Peru border

Andrea Lobo
4 May 2023

Hundreds of troops have been deployed along both sides of the Chilean-Peruvian border to harass migrant families trapped in one of the driest and most inhospitable places on Earth. The migrant crisis led to clashes between migrants and Peruvian anti-riot police over the weekend.

The migrants are mostly Venezuelans trying to enter Peru and return to Venezuela, escaping the rising cost of living in Chile and a wave of anti-immigrant propaganda and policies promoted by the pseudo-left government of President Gabriel Boric. Numerous migrants, including Venezuelans and Peruvians, are also stuck in Tacna on the Peruvian side, trying to return to their jobs and families in Chile.

Since 2013, in one of the largest migrations in modern history, over 7 million Venezuelans left the country amid an economic crisis greatly exacerbated by US sanctions. The migrants trapped in Arica, on the Chilean side, also include workers from Haiti, Colombia, Ecuador and other countries.

In late February, Boric bowed to pressures from Chile's fascistic right and the media demanding the deployment of troops against migrants in the north and declared a 90-day state of emergency along the country's borders with Peru and Bolivia. He also approved the pretrial detention of all undocumented migrants who were arrested, while the emboldened Chilean Congress is now discussing a bill that would turn irregular migration into a felony, with jail terms of up to 541 days.

Migrants are also facing a xenophobic crusade led by the Dina Boluarte regime in Peru, which came to power in a US-backed coup last December. On April 26, Boluarte decreed a state of emergency in all of Peru's border regions and deployed the military to prevent migrants from entering, declaring it a matter of "national defense."

"Those carrying out assaults, robberies and other criminal acts are foreigners," she ranted during the announcement. Her regime is also expanding police deployments in the capital, Lima, and plans to change the Constitution to make military patrols along the borders permanent. A bill was also introduced in Congress that includes 10-year prison sentences for undocumented immigrants.

The migrant crisis is reigniting nationalist tensions along the contested border. The Chilean Foreign Ministry felt compelled to declare that there is an "open dialogue" with Peru to avoid a conflict. Only highlighting the danger, Chilean Senator José Miguel Insulza, who belongs to the ruling coalition, declared that "this is not a military conflict."

Hours after these "reassurances" last week, the Chilean Foreign Ministry summoned the Peruvian ambassador to issue a "diplomatic protest" after the mayor of the Peruvian border city Tacna, Pascual Güisa, a right-wing former cop, attacked Boric on CNN as "an unspeakable and irresponsible person."

Peruvian Prime Minister Alberto Otárola only added to the tensions later that day by saying: "What we are asking President Boric and the other presidents is that they solve their problems and don't dump them in our country."

UN spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric called upon the Chilean and Peruvian governments to resolve the crisis through dialogue. She said that some migrants "have been stranded for three months, in many cases without food, water, shelter or medical care." Exacerbating an already perilous journey, these migrant families are largely living in tent camps along the border, exposed to the harsh heat during the day and freezing cold during the night.

The show of military force ostensibly against groups of unarmed families without enough money to bribe the police—reportedly the Peruvian police are demanding \$100 per person—clearly has nothing to do with the migrants themselves but derives from the irresolvable crises faced by both regimes.

The main export of both countries is copper, and their main trading partner is China, while both are betting heavily on finding and exploiting lithium deposits. Control over these and other minerals—key for modern technology and peppered across this entire region—has become a geopolitical imperative. Meanwhile, US imperialism is increasing its pressure on Latin America, which it considers its backyard, in an attempt to counter China's rising economic influence.

Rising US-China tensions, the war in Ukraine, the continuing pandemic, the reshuffling of supply chains for geopolitical and technological reasons and the effects of climate change paired with El Niño this year are all existential threats that expose the reactionary role of national borders.

As they have done for 50 years, the oligarchs in both countries are hammering on the same nail of privatizations, social cuts and deregulation to compete for foreign investments and loans while they point their fingers at and provoke tensions with their old national rivals.

The Chilean-Peruvian border was the scene of the "War of the Pacific," fought in large measure over control of massive deposits of guano, or bird excrement, then highly valued as a fertilizer and for its use in the making of gunpowder. Chile won and took Arica

and Tarapacá from Peru as well as Bolivia's exit to the sea, along with the Atacama Desert.

While the direct involvement of Britain, the main colonial power at the time, is debated, British companies were heavily financing both governments with credits and had major stakes in the minerals. Meanwhile, the rising power of the United States had sought to stoke tensions and animosity against the British, with Secretary of State James G. Blaine promoting the one-sided narrative during the war that Chile was merely acting as an "instrument" for "English capital."

Today, the conflicts between the US, the European powers, China and regional powers like Brazil are undoubtedly helping to fan the nationalist flames in what is already a new capitalist redivision of the globe.

There is no progressive justification for the existence of these separate nation-states. After the South American wars of independence against Spain (1810-1826), the local *criollo* landowning elites scuttled all attempts at forming regional federations, including wars against attempted confederations, in order to establish their own ties to European trade and credits.

Bolivia, formerly Alto Perú, and Chile were established to undermine the power of the leading post-colonial aristocracy in Peru. The rabid competition between these elites was illustrated by the fact that Bolivia shrank to about 40 percent of its original size from wars and pressures. Meanwhile, Diego Portales, one of Chile's "founding fathers" who led the war against the Peru-Bolivian Confederation, insisted on maintaining a "dominant presence" along the Pacific chiefly to subordinate Peru.

Such petty and reactionary calculations—today founded upon selling minerals or managing cheap labor for transnational corporations—are still the basis for all nationalism in the region and are completely at odds with the interests of the Latin American working class.

The attacks against migrants and the border tensions today serve essentially four political needs of the capitalist ruling elites, as Boric and Boluarte follow similar right-wing agendas:

Firstly, national chauvinism aims at pitting workers against their most powerful allies, their class brothers and sisters who come from or live in other countries. Having formed connections with various countries and cultures, migrant workers and their families are a critical contingent for the indispensable coordination of all future struggles across borders.

The national isolation of the recent mass struggles in Chile and Peru against social inequality and militarized repression—an isolation enforced by workers' real enemies among the nationalist union bureaucrats, politicians and their pseudo-left apologists—was the main cause for their failure to win any improvements for workers.

Secondly, migrants and neighboring countries are being scapegoated to divert responsibility for the deepening social crisis away from the corrupt and dependent ruling elites at home.

Thirdly, these attacks serve to mobilize a political constituency among fascistic and politically disoriented sections of the middle class and within the state apparatus itself. Boric, whose approval rating fell below 30 percent, and Boluarte with 15 percent approval are both deeply hated and find it necessary to rely on such

reactionary social layers for their ongoing attacks against the working class.

And lastly, the xenophobia serves to justify autocratic rule in the form of states of emergency that have suspended democratic rights and seen troop deployments since at least 2019, when they were used against a massive wave of strikes and demonstrations in Chile, as well as against roadblocks mounted by indigenous communities against mining transnationals in Peru.

While letting the virus run rampant, the COVID-19 pandemic was used as a cover to rule by decree and maintain threatening deployments of police and soldiers. Then, quickly dispensing with any democratic pretensions, the pseudo-left presidents Pedro Castillo in Peru and Gabriel Boric in Chile responded to renewed protests and strikes against the rising cost of living last year by deploying soldiers and riot police, with Castillo declaring a state of emergency in the capital Lima. Boric also continued an ongoing state of emergency and troop deployment to terrorize indigenous communities that have seized lands in southern Chile.

After Castillo was overthrown in a parliamentary coup backed by the United States last December, the Boluarte regime employed states of emergency to crush the nationwide protests against the coup. The state of emergency in the Puno region next to the Bolivian border had not ended before it was renewed by Boluarte last week.

Only a few weeks before confronting migrants on the border, the same troops and police had used live ammunition to massacre young workers and peasants protesting the coup.

It is worth recalling that, while seeking to pit workers against each other, the ruling elites have long collaborated in suppressing the workers movement. In 1978, Peru joined the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet and other South America regimes in Operation Condor, which at the time was being run out of the American military base in Panama. The security forces in all countries collaborated closely to kidnap and kill left-wing workers, youth and intellectuals.

In the most infamous episode involving Peru, the government collaborated with Argentina's Battalion 601 death squad in June 1980 in capturing and torturing a group of Montoneros at a Peruvian military base. A "601" member explained to the US Embassy in Buenos Aires, "Once in Argentina they will be interrogated and then permanently disappeared." The story leaked to the media, which led to a change of plans. The body of one of the abductees, Noemi Gianotti de Molfi—a founder of the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo"—was found in an apartment in Madrid, while the other bodies were never found.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)