

Amid extreme temperatures and drought, Chile suffers its deadliest wildfire on record

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A wildfire engulfed entire neighborhoods this weekend in Valparaíso and Viña del Mar in central Chile, where residents were left to fend for themselves with little to no warning. As of Monday, 122 victims have been confirmed dead and 190 remain missing.

The Valparaíso inferno is the deadliest wildfire globally since the catastrophic 2009 fires in Victoria, Australia, and the deadliest disaster in Chile since the 2010 earthquake.

In scenes of horror and desperation now increasingly familiar to millions worldwide, the skies over the communes of Viña del Mar, Quilpué and Villa Alemana turned orange on Friday afternoon, as tens of thousands of families ran from fast approaching walls of flames and smoke.

Many elderly residents were not evacuated, while others had no time. Entire columns of people in vehicles or on foot were trapped, as described by a resident in destroyed Villa Independencia to TVN Chile on Sunday. “People were dying in a circle that became a living hell,” she said, while pointing to the place where it happened.

Drone footage shows entire neighborhoods turned to ashes, with residents describing to the news agencies how “terrible winds” made the flames jump rapidly from hill to hill, and “balls of fire” reached their homes “from one moment to the next.”

A total of 14,000 homes have been destroyed in the Valparaíso-Viña del Mar metropolitan area, which comprises Chile’s main port city and its most popular summer seaside resort, and is home to more than one million people. The wildfire in the area remains ablaze but is reportedly under control.

President Gabriel Boric, who leads a coalition government of the pseudo-left Broad Front and Stalinist Communist Party, declared curfews and a state of exception in the Valparaíso region, suspending democratic rights and deploying troops. While ostensibly

there to assist the firefighters, soldiers have been patrolling the streets chiefly to intimidate and contain growing social unrest.

Boric has framed the fires chiefly as a “threat to national security” and focused his statements on pursuing individuals who supposedly provoked the fires. After a meeting of the National Security Council on Monday, he portrayed the disaster as one caused by “organized crime” and proclaimed this “your priority, that of the Chilean men and women.” He promised to have “the presence of more military and Carabineros police to ensure security” and grant further powers to security forces.

The governor of Valparaíso, Rodrigo Mundaca, an internationally acclaimed water rights and environmental activist belonging to Boric’s Broad Front coalition, was asked about the underlying causes by reporters on Monday. He responded: “The causes that have generated this disaster are a handful of wretches and thugs who have come to destroy our city and we are going to confront them with the greatest possible rigor and we are going to put them in jail. We cannot tolerate it because the fires have turned into homicides.”

Gerardo, a victim in Quilpué who confronted Boric in person during the president’s brief visit to the fire-ravaged region, said to television reporters: “We don’t want to wait two, three, four or 10 years like we waited for these [subsidized] houses to be built. We don’t want to come home from work every day and sleep on the floor with our family. Not having a toothbrush, not having a change of clothes... It’s terrible and he comes and leaves us with all the uncertainty, better he doesn’t come.”

A neighbor then characterized the delegation: “they are all five-million-peso salaries.” In other words, why would they care? Boric is a bourgeois politician making over 10 million pesos (US\$10,500) per month, compared to a median salary in Chile of just over 500,000 pesos (US\$525).

Pinning the blame on a handful of ill-intentioned arsonists doesn't hold up to any scrutiny. While research shows that over 99 percent of wildfires in Chile begin due to human activity, most are due to carelessness, burning garbage or poorly extinguished bonfires. The minority caused by arson attacks have deep social causes, including local protests against the intensive monoculture plantations.

Currently, most of South America is facing the peak of the continent's summer fire season amid conditions of extreme drought, which are driven by climactic factors. There are currently 165 active fires across all regions between Valparaíso and southernmost Magallanes, including 73 new ones just between Saturday and Sunday.

The Amazon is seeing its worst drought in 120 years and Argentina in 60 years, while a drought and record temperatures provoked 136 wildfires around the Colombian capital of Bogotá in January.

Forestry and environmental researchers cited by the media since Friday have without exception highlighted the 15-year drought in the region and extreme temperatures driven by global warming, profit-driven changes in vegetation making the ecosystem less resilient to fires, anarchistic real estate developments, and the underfunded body of firefighters and fire prevention programs.

A 2016 study "Wildfires in Chile: A Review" by Xavier Úbeda and Pablo Sarricolea found that "today, as in many other parts of the world, the fire regime—pattern, frequency, and intensity—has grown at an alarming rate." They attribute this growth to a reduction in rains of 30 percent across Chile, changes in flora and other environmental factors.

At the time, the author Úbeda called for "improving warning systems, monitoring weather conditions with meso-scale models that can predict situations such as the 30/30/30 situation." Experts have long used this rule of thumb to tell if there is a risk for fires to spread: a temperature of over 30°C, relative humidity below 30 percent and winds at or above 30 knots.

On January 28, the Meteorological Administration of Chile warned of a heat wave bringing temperatures 3 to 6 degrees Celsius above average in the central region, reaching 36-38°C (97-100°F) in the valleys and on the mountains. The temperature for Valparaíso on Friday was 33°C; winds reached 43 knots, and humidity is currently far below the average.

The devastating fire in Valparaíso began on Friday, February 2, around 2:00 p.m., with several foci spreading

along the hills and through suburbs. By 10 p.m. the fires had covered 6,200 hectares and have now destroyed 10,000 hectares.

But there was no early warning system and the calls and protocols to evacuate were ineffective and late. The first was sent via text message in the Villa Alemana commune shortly after 5 p.m., followed by warnings to Quilpué and several suburbs of Viña del Mar at 6:41 p.m. once the fires were at their doorstep.

Such criminal negligence by the ruling class takes place after record wildfires in 2014 and again in 2017, which followed similar warnings of heatwaves and killed about a dozen people each. Then, during the 2022-2023 wildfire season, which killed dozens in Valparaíso, the pseudo-left President Boric maintained the same police-state approach about finding the individuals responsible for the fires. "I will move the heavens, the sea and the Earth" to find them, he declared.

Regarding vegetation, in 1974, the military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet signed a law subsidizing 75 percent of the cost of the highly flammable Eucalyptus monoculture plantations, which are largely unregulated and in the hands of major corporations.

This remains in place, as well as Pinochet's privatization of water. Currently, bills introduced to block the sale to real estate agencies of recently burned properties and another that would ban "forest plantations," including of invasive species like eucalyptus and pine, near urban areas, have fallen by the wayside as a result of the vested interests of the real estate and wood industries.

The bankrupt response by the pseudo-left President Boric to the Valparaíso inferno, like his continuation of the "let it rip" response to the COVID-19 pandemic and alignment with the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, again shows that there is no national solution to any of the major social issues facing workers today, including the myriad of disasters being caused by global warming. Every section of the capitalist ruling class offers only dictatorship, barbarism, and death.



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