

Earthquake Exposes Social Chasm in Chile

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Anger is mounting in Chile over the inadequacy and indifference that have characterized the government's response to the earthquake of February 27.

Last Friday's Wall Street Journal quoted Chilean sociologist Lucia Dammert, who said Chile was experiencing "a social earthquake" that had revealed "a fractured country, socially divided with a population that feels excluded..."

Concepción, with more than half a million inhabitants, the second largest city in Chile, continues to be occupied by over 14,000 troops. On March 2, the state of siege imposed on Concepción and other cities was extended to two additional coastal towns, Curicó and Talca. On March 6, an 18-hour curfew in Concepción was lowered to 13 hours.

While much is being made by the Chilean media of the "recovery" of looted items in Concepción and other cities by troops and police, the speed with which the government sent troops to occupy Concepción contrasts with the repeated delays in sending material aid. In the face of widespread discontent, the massive use of troops in conjunction with a hysterical media campaign against "looters" was aimed at suppressing social unrest and polarizing public opinion against the very victims of the earthquake.

The social fault lines exposed by the earthquake have been deepened by decades of "free market" policies, first introduced by the Pinochet dictatorship and continued by subsequent regimes, which have exacerbated the chasm separating Chile's elite from the majority of the population.

Notwithstanding the talk in the US media of rigorous building codes, regulations designed to protect against earthquakes were enforced selectively and on a class basis, i.e., for the homes and businesses of the wealthy, not for the dwellings and neighborhoods of the working class and the poor. The shoddily built homes of the poor collapsed or were washed out to sea, while those of the rich withstood the impact of the quake.

The final death toll will likely exceed 1,000. There are as of yet no accurate estimates of the number of missing and wounded. In addition to the 500,000 homes that were destroyed outright, another million may need to be demolished. Several million people have been affected.

The slow response by the administration of outgoing President Michelle Bachelet to the humanitarian and health crisis will undoubtedly result in unnecessary deaths and health problems, particularly in the coastal towns, which are home to some of the poorest people in Chile and, for that reason, were particularly ill-prepared for the disaster.

Government health authorities have ruled out a dysentery epidemic in the coastal towns. However, diarrhea is on the rise because of a lack of potable water, and there is an increasing danger of infection as a result of injuries caused to people wading through the flooded areas and digging through the rubble of buildings.

"We are going to keep needing water, electric systems, a functioning sewage system.... We need chemical toilets, and when it starts raining, people living in tents are going to get wet and sick. All this is going to cause infections," said Talcahuano Mayor Gaston Saavedra, whose port city was heavily damaged by the quake and tsunami.

Pharmacies have run out of medicines required for the treatment of chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and psychological illnesses. "I haven't taken my medicine for two or three days. I really should take it every day," said Miguel Hidalgo, a retired truck driver with chronic high blood pressure who was told that there was one package left of a drug he needs to keep his kidneys working.

Thirty-six hospitals were destroyed by the quake. Field hospitals have been set up, but they are not yet taking patients.

A poll taken on Sunday by the Santiago daily *el Mercurio* revealed growing anger among the population. Sixty percent of Chileans were critical of the government's response. Sixty-six percent blame construction companies for shoddy building practices.

Despite an intensive media campaign to demonize so-called "looters," 26 percent of the respondents thought they were justified, given the circumstances. Throughout the week the capitalist media, inside and outside Chile, gave exaggerated accounts of looting and vandalism, condemning in most cases the acts of desperate and hungry working class families.

Yet for over 30 years they have had nothing to say of the looting of the national wealth by transnational mining companies. According to a recent report in *El Ciudadano*, the take from the exploitation of Chile's copper added up to over \$70 billion, more than twice what it would take to restore Chile to its pre-earthquake state.

That looting had its source in the privatization of most of the nationalized mines under Pinochet, and was facilitated by successive Christian Democratic-Socialist Party regimes under the Concertación Coalition, including that of President Bachelet.

Only a small minority of the population benefited from the privatizations and other neo-liberal policies, while the majority saw their living standards lag behind.

From the beginning of her term in 2006, Bachelet had faced increasing class tensions, beginning with massive student protests and strikes by teachers demanding free transportation and defending the right to education. These were followed by strikes by health professionals and copper miners.

The disaffection of these and other layers of the population resulted in the electoral loss last December of the Concertación parties and the victory of the right-wing candidate, Sebastián Piñera, one of the wealthiest men in Latin America. He takes office on Thursday, having pledged to extend the free market policies of privatization and deregulation.

Piñera was the candidate of the Chilean Alliance, a coalition of two right-wing

parties—Piñera's National Renewal (Renovación Nacional) and the Independent Democratic Union (Unión Democrática Nacional) the political heir to the Pinochet dictatorship.

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