

8-3-2012

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### Recommended Citation

Witte-Lebhar, Benjamin. "'Mapuche conflict' flares up in Chile's Araucanía region." (2012). [https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la\\_energy\\_notien/87](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la_energy_notien/87)

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# “Mapuche Conflict” Flares Up In Chile’s Araucanía Region

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By Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

A flurry of arson attacks, land occupations, and violent police raids have refocused public attention on Chile’s long-simmering "Mapuche conflict," which is once again showing signs of boiling over.

So-named for the involvement of ethnic Mapuches, Chile’s largest indigenous group, the conflict also involves non-Mapuche farmers and rural business magnates, as well as heavily armed carabineros [uniformed police], which maintain a constant presence in and around certain ‘hotspot’ communities in the Biobío and Araucanía regions. Fueling tensions are issues of poverty, land ownership, and racism.

In its most benign form, the conflict centers on nonviolent land occupations by Mapuches who claim ancestral ownership of farmland that is legally controlled by forestry companies and other large scale landholders. Occasionally, perpetrators— who tend to wear hoods to disguise their identities—have burned barns, homes, vehicles, and farm equipment.

Police and prosecutors claim Mapuche groups like the militant Coordinadora Arauco-Malleco (CAM) are behind the violence. Some of CAM’s leaders have been charged in recent years under Chile’s dictatorship-era terrorism law.

Indigenous leaders say the real terrorists in the conflict are the carabineros, who routinely raid Mapuche homes and use notoriously heavy-handed tactics to bust up land seizures. In at least three instances, Mapuche activists have died at the hands of police. The most recent case took place in August 2009, when a police officer shot and killed 24-year-old Jaime Facundo Mendoza Collío during an operation to evict Mapuches from a seized Araucanía farm.

## ***'Sell a cow and buy a shotgun'***

President Sebastián Piñera's assumption of office in early 2010 was followed by a relative lull in the conflict. The one exception was a high-profile hunger strike organized by a group of more than three-dozen Mapuche prisoners, including CAM leader Héctor Llaitul. The jailed Mapuches, many of whom were awaiting trial on terrorism charges, accused the government of

political persecution. The Piñera administration eventually negotiated an end to the harrowing hunger strike, agreeing among other things to prosecute the men as normal "criminals".

Whatever good will may have been garnered from those discussions, however, evaporated this past April when, for the first time, carabineros lost one of their own to the conflict. Officer Hugo Albornoz Albornoz was fatally shot by unknown assailants following an April 2 raid on Mapuche village in the Ercilla sector of the Araucanía.

Tensions have flared in the aftermath of the shooting—on all sides. New land occupations and a recent surge in arson attacks have some farm owners calling on the government to declare a state of siege in the Araucanía. Others are talking about taking the law into their own hands.

"The people around here have animals. My advice to them is, 'Sell a cow and buy a shotgun with 100 or 200 shells, and as soon as someone appears [on your land], you put a bullet in them,'" farm owner Joel Ovalle said in a July 20 interview with Radio Cooperativa. Ovalle's comments followed a rash of arson attacks that included two Ercilla homes, a school, and a barn containing some 1,200 bails of hay—all burned within a 24-hour period.

President Piñera responded to the violence by calling an emergency "security summit." During the meeting, which took place July 24 in Santiago, Interior Minister Rodrigo Hinzpeter announced plans to step up police presence in the Araucanía, supply them with state-of-the-art equipment, and improve their intelligence-gathering abilities. He also promised to dispatch a team of lawyers specially trained to pursue perpetrators of such crimes.

"This is an administration that is very clear when it comes to the concept of order and public security," Hinzpeter said. "Burning the houses of honest, hard-working people is something we consider quite simply to be a criminal and murderous act."

Piñera and Hinzpeter were joined at the security summit by top representatives of the Carabineros de Chile and Policía de Investigaciones (PDI), public prosecutors, and the government's primary representative for the Araucanía, Intendente Andrés Molina. The list of participants did not include any Mapuche representatives.

### ***Children as human shields?***

Rights groups worry that the government's security plan, rather than ease tensions in the Araucanía, will instead fan the flames of an already highly combustible situation. Documented cases of police brutality against Mapuches abound. By sending even more carabineros and PDI agents to the region, critics warn, the government is likely to exacerbate the problem.

Even now, relations between police and Mapuche communities appear in some cases to be poisoned beyond repair. One of the more recent flare-ups occurred July 23, on the eve of the government's security summit, when, according to news reports, some 200 carabineros took part in an operation to break up a Mapuche land occupation in Ercilla. Police arrested about a dozen squatters. Several others sustained injuries and were taken to a nearby hospital where,

later in the day, police used pellet guns to ward off a group of Mapuches who had come to visit their friends and family members inside. At least two children received gunshot wounds.

Images of the bloodied children quickly circulated in the national media, causing outrage among Mapuche groups, human rights organizations, and some opposition lawmakers. "These images we've seen, in which children appear injured, are unacceptable," said Partido Socialista (PS) Deputy Fidel Espinoza, head of the Human Rights Commission in the Camara de Diputados. "For that reason we're going to ask Mr. Hinzpeter, given his job as interior minister and [head] of the carabineros, to explain the exact nature of the procedures being used in the conflict zone. Because based on what we've seen, their actions are disproportionate."

Police countered by accusing Mapuches of using children as "human shields." The claim was echoed by the government's top health official in the Araucanía, Mauricio Ojeda, who said Mapuche parents are to blame for exposing their children to "these types of situations."

### ***Supporting the police "100%"***

Many observers view such statements as evidence that the Piñera administration—for all its talk of neutrality—is, in fact, taking sides in the conflict. The president did little to challenge the impression when, during a July 24 television interview, he said police excesses "will not be permitted," yet went on to say, "We support the Carabineros de Chile and the Policía de Investigaciones 100% because they have the obligation to maintain public order. They risk their lives. Many of them have died. Many of them are gravely injured."

Critics say further proof of where the administration's allegiances lie can be gleaned from statements by both the justice and agricultural ministers, both of whom advocated in recent weeks for a "self-defense" approach to the arson attacks. In an interview last week with Radio Cooperativa, Justice Minister Teodoro Ribera admitted he owns a gun and is "prepared to use it" in case of emergency. Agriculture Minister Luis Mayol made similar statements several days earlier, saying he "understands why farmers [in the conflict zone] would arm themselves."

Such tough talk does not bode well for the already precarious situation in the Araucanía, Chile's poorest region and home to roughly 30% of the country's approximately 800,000 Mapuche. Groups like Observatorio Ciudadano, an indigenous rights group based in Temuco, say real solutions to the conflict can only come through dialogue. What the Piñera administration is offering so far seems to be anything but.

"The measures announced by the government," the Observatorio argued in a June 25 communiqué, "focus on the strategies of criminalization and stigmatization of the Mapuche world. Those [approaches] do nothing to help resolve the conflicts they're meant to address. Instead, the only thing they do, irresponsibly, is heap more fuel on the fire and preserve the practice of systematic discrimination against the Mapuche people and its members."