1-25-2008

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Category/Department: Chile  
Published: 2008-01-25

Protests by indigenous Mapuche activists in Chile put pressure on the government of President Michelle Bachelet in December and January. One protestor died in early January demonstrations, while an activist serving a 10-year jail sentence conducted a hunger strike that put her in the hospital and made international headlines.

Bachelet designated a special commission of ministers to resolve the growing tensions and faced calls from various organizations to pardon the fasting activist. Clash leaves one dead Mapuche Indians trying to reclaim farmland they say belonged to their ancestors clashed with police in Chile Jan. 3 in violence that left one protestor dead.

About two dozen indigenous people invaded a farm near the southern city of Vilcun, about 700 km south of Santiago, at dawn and started a fire that destroyed some grass stored as feed for livestock, authorities said. Police, who had guarded the farm for months because of previous incursions, chased them to a nearby school.

A university student, Matias Catrileo, was shot and died, regional public defender Jose Martinez told Radio Cooperativa of Santiago. No further details on the circumstances of his killing were immediately known. Deputy interior minister Felipe Harboe said authorities were investigating. Different reports put his age at 22 or 26 years old.

Police examiners later reported that he had been shot in the back, with the bullet exiting through his abdomen, contradicting prior reports that said he had been shot from in front. Two police officials were detained as the investigation into his death continued. The Public Ministry, charged with national security and prosecutions, appointed special prosecutors for the violent events in the regions of Bio-Bio and Araucania, where the Mapuche conflicts are taking place.

The prosecutor's office said there were non-Mapuche defendants, stressing that prosecution was against violent offenders, not a specific ethnicity. Mapuches and police have clashed sporadically for years in southern Chile (see NotiSur, 1992-07-21, 1998-03-06 and 2001-08-17), but the conflict had not produced a fatality since 2003.

As of Jan. 8, police were protecting the head executive in charge of Trayenko hydroelectric plant, 43-year-old engineer Mario Marchese Necklenburg, after a radical Mapuche organization allegedly attacked him. Police said members of the Coordinadora Arauco Malleco (CAM) fired on his car in an attempted homicide. The dam is in a disputed area.
Fasting activist hospitalized

An imprisoned Indian-rights activist who had been on a hunger strike for more than 90 days was sent to a hospital early Jan. 13 because of her deteriorating condition, authorities reported. Patricia Troncoso, 39, had lost nearly 55 pounds since starting her hunger strike to demand better prison conditions for the activists convicted of violence in their fight to claim land. She also demands a new trial, which officials say is not legally possible. Troncoso, imprisoned in 2002, is serving a 10-year sentence for participating in a group that set a fire on a farm Mapuche activists say belonged to their ancestors.

The prison service said Troncoso, who is not Mapuche, was transferred to a hospital in the southern city of Temuco. Her defenders pointed to her sentence as excessive and politically motivated, claiming it was longer than those of violent criminals who may have committed worse offenses.

Bachelet appoints ministerial team

Bachelet's designation of the three ministers to a special commission came as increasing calls to pardon Troncoso came from groups like the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and legislators. The group, headed by incoming Minister of the Interior Edmundo Perez Yoma, is to study and propose solutions to the poverty and social ills that Mapuche peoples face. Supporters of the Mapuche organizations call on the public to separate violent, radical factions from the mainstream of Mapuche culture, but the threats, arsons, and violent clashes get significant play in the Chilean media.

For the past decade, Bachelet and her predecessor governments of the Concertacion coalition have spent about US$200 million to purchase lands that have then been handed over to Mapuche communities in Araucania, where about 900,000 Mapuche people live, but poverty persists and activists criticize the government for doing too little to alleviate the situation. A year ago, the nation's largest indigenous group criticized Bachelet's administration.

"The president acknowledged the Chilean state's 'historical debt' to the Mapuche people, agreed to appoint a special interlocutor to engage in dialogue, and promised to report in March how the process would be implemented," indigenous leader Miguel Melin said.

"During her electoral campaign, the president invited us to engage in debate, and today we have brought concrete proposals," commented Melin, one of the 40 Mapuches who traveled from the southern region of Araucania to Santiago to meet with Bachelet at La Moneda palace, the seat of government. He appreciated that the president had agreed to visit Araucania to convey her reply to the Mapuche requests in person, saying it was an essential symbolic gesture to establish that there is a real will to make progress in the dialogue, although he said he hoped for deeds rather than words.

At a "trawun" (meeting, in the Mapuzungun language) held Nov. 10-11, 2006, in Quepe, in Araucania, approximately 3,000 people belonging to 34 Mapuche communities and organizations from the southern Bio-Bio, Araucanía, and Los Lagos regions attended. They produced a 51-page document, Proposals by Mapuche Territorial Organizations to the State of Chile, beginning with
a historical review of the complex relationship throughout the centuries between this indigenous people and the state.

The document set out a number of proposals for political participation, the right to self-determination, the recovery of ancestral lands, economic development, education, health, lawmaking, and justice. "For 17 years, we have been promised greater social justice and participation. Over and over again we have been assured that there will be constitutional recognition of indigenous peoples and that Convention 169 of the ILO (International Labor Organization about respect for indigenous peoples within independent states) will be ratified, but to this day neither of these assurances has been fulfilled," the document read. The Mapuche participants said they were tired of the paternalistic assistance policies applied since 1990 by the three previous Concertacion governments.

In the view of the ethnic group, the government was continuing to promote private investment in Mapuche territories, such as forestry plantations, hydroelectric stations, pulp and paper mills, geothermal power plants, highways, airports, and rubbish dumps projects that rob them of their ancestral lands, interfere with their culture, and undermine their quality of life. "We do not want our aspirations to be shelved and forgotten again, nor do we want to be offered programs and projects that are not definitive solutions to our demands. We want a new relationship between the Chilean state and the Mapuche people," the document said.

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