

11-13-2009

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "No End In Sight For Worsening Mapuche Conflict in Chile." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13827>

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No End In Sight For Worsening Mapuche Conflict in Chile

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Chile

Published: 2009-11-13

Historic tensions in southern Chile's Araucania Region have escalated in recent months, with police and Mapuche activists now engaged in a dangerous game of cat and mouse that is turning increasingly violent and shows no signs of ending anytime soon. After a period of relative calm, the "Mapuche conflict" kicked back into gear this past Southern Hemisphere winter when a delegation of indigenous leaders traveled to Santiago but was refused an audience with President Michelle Bachelet.

The Mapuche, by far Chile's largest indigenous group with an estimated population of some 800,000, seek greater political autonomy and recovery of ancestral lands, particularly in the Araucania, an area roughly 600 km south of Santiago, also known as Region IX.

Mapuche groups reacted to the presidential snub with a series of land occupations that led, in turn, to violent confrontations with carabineros, Chile's uniformed national police. The carabineros, technically a branch of the armed forces, maintain a constant presence in and around certain "hot-spot" indigenous communities in the south. Residents there liken the police presence to a military siege.

The standoff turned deadly in August when a carabinero officer shot and killed 24-year-old Jaime Facundo Mendoza Collio during a police operation to evict Mapuche activists from a seized Araucania farm. Although Bachelet described Collio's death as "painful and regrettable," the killing the third since 2002 only served to fuel Mapuche frustrations and exacerbate antagonisms with the Chilean state.

"At this point we're talking about an issue that involves an entire people," said Galvarino Reiman of the Region IX-based Coordinacion de Organizaciones Mapuches (COM). "There's a Mapuche sentiment that's now being embraced universally, independent of which specific community or organization someone might belong to. Just by being Mapuche, one feels sympathetic to the cause."

Simmering tensions boil over

Following the Aug. 12 killing, Mapuche groups and their sympathizers organized protests throughout the country. In the Araucania and neighboring Region de Los Lagos, activists stepped up their land occupations and, in a handful of cases, groups of encapuchados (hooded individuals) presumed to be Mapuches carried out arson attacks.

On Oct. 20, encapuchados burned two forestry-company trucks near the Region IX town of Angol. A week earlier, in the same area, several people attacked a toll booth, where they burned a truck, fired buckshot at a car, and stole approximately US\$75, according to news reports.

Carabineros have lashed back with frequent and reportedly heavy-handed raids on Mapuche homes and institutions, arresting dozens suspected of involvement in the various arson attacks. Authorities are prosecuting several Mapuche suspects under Chile's controversial anti-terrorism law, a relic of the Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) dictatorship (see NotiSur, 2009-03-18).

Originally aimed at controlling armed political groups involved in kidnappings, attacks on police stations, and assassinations, the law decreed in 1984 extends prison sentences, restricts pre-trial release, allows for anonymous witnesses, and gives prosecutors the right to withhold evidence from the defense for up to six months.

Human rights groups have long complained that Chile, which dusted off the Pinochet-era law during the administration of former President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), goes too far by applying it to the Mapuche land-conflict issue. While acts such as arson are crimes, as recognized by Chile's criminal code, they do not constitute terrorism, argue organizations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW).

Chile's use of the anti-terrorism law for crimes committed by Mapuche in the context of land conflicts, which do not approach this threshold of seriousness, is not only inappropriate but also reinforces existing prejudices against the Mapuche people," reads a 2004 HRW report co-authored with the Region IX-based pro-indigenous-rights group Observatorio Ciudadano (OC).

Mapuches complain also about regular police brutality, including against children. The OC reported that on Oct. 5, the anniversary of the 1988 plebiscite that effectively ended the Pinochet regime, carabineros injured and arrested a 14-year-old Mapuche boy with the initials FPM. The boy claims he was then taken aboard a helicopter, and police threatened to toss him out unless he revealed the names of people involved in land seizures.

Less than two weeks later, carabineros raided an Araucania school where Mapuche community leaders were meeting with officials from the government's Corporacion Nacional Forestal (CONAF), the national forestry service. Witnesses claim the police fired shots and launched tear-gas canisters, injuring approximately a dozen people half of them children.

"It's so obvious. There is such striking evidence that the behavior of the carabineros is absolutely excessive," said the OC's Jose Vargas. "There's a noteworthy escalation of violence by the government and carabineros that is just out of control. And no one is taking reasonability for it."

Conflict attracts international spotlight

Chilean organizations are not alone in criticizing Chile's handling of the conflict. In recent weeks, a growing list of international groups including the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Paris, France-based Federacion Internacional de Derechos Humanos (FIDH) has also expressed concerns, calling on the Chilean government to rein in its police force and investigate the various cases of alleged brutality. "If we don't know what happened, we can't come up with a solution to end the violence against children. To avoid having another generation marked by violence, we need to know exactly what took place," Gary Stahl, UNICEF's top representative in Chile, said in a recent press

release. "Police officers need to protect children every time they carry out an operation. And they need to consider following different procedures if there are children present."

Chile's interior undersecretary Patricio Rosende countered by accusing Mapuches of using children as "human shields." To support his claims, the government official presented members of the Senate's Constitutional Committee with a video showing a hooded activist taunting police while flanked by two small children. Not everyone in Congress is convinced by the images. Sen. Alejandro Navarro of the leftist Movimiento Amplio Social (MAS) insists carabineros have injured Mapuche children and says Rosende's accusations are a "mistaken" attempt by the government to defend the police and manipulate public opinion.

"Even though the government denies there are injured Mapuche children, they do exist. The cases are documented," Sen. Navarro, a former presidential candidate, told NotiSur. "The injuries take place during the raids, because the police, in an indiscriminate way, force themselves into the communities where children live and play." "The state has to demilitarize," he added. "Hundreds of military personnel patrol the zone every day of the year, at an enormous cost to the state and in direct benefit to the private forestry companies. The harassment the communities are subjected to, in ID checks and access to the towns, is the kind of thing you'd expect from a military regime, not a democracy."

Government combines concessions, security

The Bachelet administration, now down to its final months in office, stands by its record on the Mapuche issue while doing its best to downplay the current wave of unrest. During an Oct. 22 meeting in Temuco, the Region IX capital, General Secretary to the President Jose Antonio Vierra-Gallo called the cases of violence "more or less isolated." He also denied they in any way constitute a "civil war," a concern that first arose two days earlier when members of a radical Mapuche group known as the Coordinadora Arauco-Malleco (CAM) publicly renounced their Chilean citizenship and declared war on the state.

At the same time, the government unveiled a new US\$3.5 million security plan, which among other things calls for installing video cameras along roads where Mapuches have been known to carry out arson attacks. Vierra-Gallo, designated in August (in the wake of the Collio killing) as Bachelet's top indigenous-policy coordinator, was joined in the Temuco meeting by the interior minister and by several top-brass carabineros officials. But the Bachelet administration insists it has also made generous concessions to Chile's Mapuche communities.

In April 2008, Bachelet unveiled a program called Re-Conocer, which calls for distributing land to 115 Mapuche communities designated as "priorities" by the governments' indigenous-affairs bureau (Corporacion Nacional de Desarrollo Indigena, CONADI). Through that and similar projects, Bachelet and her predecessors handed over 600,000 hectares to Mapuche communities, the government claims.

Viera-Gallo says the government plans to deed an additional 33,000 ha before Bachelet leaves office in March 2010. Critics say the government's "stick-and-carrot" approach simply does not work,

particularly now, with the escalating violence overshadowing any goodwill the state may want to convey.

"The violence doesn't help anybody, neither the Mapuches nor the state," said the COM's Galvarino Reiman. "But at this point it's a reality. It's just a matter of reading the news, because it's coming out publicly. There's also the question of psychological violence. It's clearly something that spurs more rebellion. And that's serious, because the children now are growing up with that, having that negative opinion against the Chilean state."

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