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Chile: Massive Earthquake Strikes Just Ahead Of Presidential Handoff

by LADB Staff
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As Chile digs out from the massive Feb. 27 earthquake, the largest to hit the South American country in a half century, political divisions exacerbated by the recent elections continue to lurk just below the surface. The seemingly interminable quake, which lasted more than two horrifying minutes, struck in the wee hours of Saturday morning and affected a huge swath of the country from north of Santiago to as far south as Puerto Montt in the Lakes Region. For the millions of Chileans shaken awake by the monster magnitude 8.8 event, it was in all senses a living nightmare. In Santiago, home to roughly one-third of Chile’s 16 million inhabitants, the quake smashed highways and bridges, damaged the international airport, and ruined many residences, including a four-story, 24-unit apartment building in the western suburb of Maipu that now totters on the verge of collapse. Some of the building’s former residents are now camping on the street or in their cars, afraid to leave the site for fear looters will go into the half-crushed building and steal their abandoned belongings. "We were sleeping upstairs, when it started to move," Teresa Uribe, one of the Maipu building's now homeless residents, told NotiSur. "At the beginning it was still smooth, we just stood up and we went under the door. Then it started to explode. Explosions, the lights went off. We honestly thought we were going to die at that moment, that we weren't going to survive." Widespread destruction In Maule, Biobio As news began filtering in from areas farther south, however, it became clear that, as bad as things were in Santiago, the devastation in the Biobio and Maule Regions the areas closest to the epicenter was even more extensive. In the Biobio capital of Concepcion, Chile's second-largest city with a metro-region population of more than 1 million people, a high-rise apartment building that had opened just last year collapsed completely, trapping more than 100 victims inside. Along the coast, the destruction was even more overwhelming. Towns like Dichato, Constitucion, and many others were literally smashed to bits by tsunami waves, which swept the shoreline Saturday afternoon despite an initial assessment by the Navy downplaying the possibility. Defense Minister Francisco Vidal later recognized the error. As of press time, the death toll nationwide stood at approximately 500, but exact figures are still unavailable. Recovery efforts have been complicated by outright anarchy in Concepcion and, to a lesser degree, other towns in the most devastated areas. In the Biobio capital, looters stormed supermarkets and pharmacies the day after the quake, prompting President Michelle Bachelet to declare a state of siege. Wielding special constitutional powers, the president sent in the Army and imposed long curfews in various cities. On Monday, March 1, the security situation in Concepcion unraveled further. Lootings continued. Arsonists destroyed a supermarket and a large department store. Bachelet called for calm and appealed to Chileans to "follow their consciences." A day later, she dispatched another contingent of troops to the region. "Our concern is offering the people security and tranquility," Bachelet told reporters March 2, three days after the quake. "We understand perfectly the anguish and the pressing needs of the people, but it's also clear for us that there are small groups committing criminal acts that are provoking enormous material damage. This we won't accept." A tale of two presidents Politically, the disaster couldn't have come at a more complicated moment for Chile less than two weeks before Bachelet leaves office. ©2011 The University of New Mexico, Latin American & Iberian Institute. All rights reserved.
on March 11. Ironically, the president was reported just days before the disaster to be including a role in the Haiti earthquake-relief effort among her imminent retirement plans. In the meantime, Bachelet's successor, President-elect Sebastian Pinera, waited in the wings just days from taking the reigns of power and inheriting responsibility for Chile's worst natural disaster in a decade. Even without the earthquake to reckon with, the government faces its biggest transition since the end of the Gen. Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990). During the past two decades, Chile has been led by four presidents from the same center-left coalition, the Concertacion. Administrations blended relatively smoothly from one to the other as the various Concertacion presidents chose, in many cases, to recycle Cabinet ministers and other key personnel. Defense Minister Vidal, for example, was the top spokesperson for Bachelet's predecessor, former President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006). That's all about to change. Pinera, who beat former Concertacion President Eduardo Frei (1994-2000) in a January runoff (see NotiSur, 2010-01-22), hails from the other side of the political aisle the conservative Alianza coalition and has already made it clear he will implement a total overhaul of the government (see NotiSur, 2010-02-19). Pinera, a billionaire businessman and one-time senator from the center-right Renovacion National (RN), will be Chile's first conservative leader since Pinochet. He's the first rightist to win a presidential election in Chile in more than 50 years. "Personally, I'm a little worried about the transition because the future administration doesn't have the training, the experience," said Camilo Navarro, a Maipu resident whose daughter lost her home in the quake. "The ministries in place right now are on top of the national problems. But the people who are coming in now?" Others, however, welcome the pending transition and are using the disaster as a platform to disparage the outgoing administration. Concepcion Mayor Jacqueline van Rysselberghe of the far-right Union Democrata Independiente (UDI), the RN's Alianza partner, has been a particularly outspoken critic, blasting the outgoing administration for its "embarrassing" one-day delay in sending recovery personnel. "I'm sure that if it had been a child or grandchild of the people that make decisions things would have been quicker," she said. The disaster has prompted seesaw appearances by the two presidents. Prior to the quake all eyes were on Pinera. In the immediate aftermath, however, Bachelet very much assumed control of the situation reportedly driving herself through the dark streets of Santiago to the headquarters of the Oficina Nacional de Emergencias e Informaciones (ONEMI), where she delivered pre-dawn press conferences. That night she delivered a national televised address calling on Chileans to "be strong." Meanwhile, Pinera has been jockeying for his own share of the limelight. Like Bachelet, the president-elect flew south on Saturday, the day of the earthquake, beating ONEMI to the punch that afternoon by announcing one of the first death-toll updates. Bachelet initially told international aid groups to hold off until Chilean officials could properly assess the situation. Pinera told members of the press that aid from abroad should be welcome. On March 2, Chile received a lightning visit from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The high-profile US official met with both Bachelet and Pinera but separately. The political undertones have not been lost on the Chilean public, whose opinion of the government's handling of the crisis tends to follow party lines. Bachelet's backers think she's doing a marvelous job "straight A's," said Navarro. "I'm not impressed," said a young Techo para Chile volunteer with clear conservative leanings. Many, however, agree this is hardly the moment for bipartisan bickering. "I think the government needs to be united right now," said Raul Vasquez, a Santiago taxi driver. "People shouldn't be saying 'I'm from the right,' or 'I'm from the left.' That can't be. They need to unite and help the people as a single country. Obviously, though, politics figures in. People try to use the situation to their advantage."