Mapuche "Terrorists" Push On With Harrowing Hunger Strike

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by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
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Nearly two months into a dangerous hunger strike, more than 30 indigenous Mapuche prisoners are struggling to gain national attention at a time when all eyes have been focused north, to the desert city of Copiapó, where another group of Chilean men, buried by an Aug. 5 mine collapse, are also struggling for survival.

The news coming out of Copiapó is understandably compelling. On Aug. 22, 17 days after the mine accident, rescuers on the ground were able to punch a small hole 700 meters underground into a refuge area where they hoped to locate at least some of the 33 trapped miners. What the rescuers discovered after retracting their long probe was nothing short of miraculous: a note confirming that all were alive and accounted for.

With the television cameras rolling, Chile’s beaming President Sebastián Piñera read the note aloud: "The 33 of us are fine in the shelter."

Celebrations erupted throughout the country while news organizations the world over promptly dispatched reporters to the scene. Piñera, who took office last March, has since promised to free the trapped miners by Christmas. Until that happens, the harrowing round-the-clock rescue effort and the miners’ nightmarish wait will continue to monopolize the attention of the Chilean public, media, and political leadership.

In the meantime, well away from the media spotlight, another dramatic survival story is unfolding in Chile, in the southcentral cities of Concepción, Temuco, and Valdivia, where 32 Mapuche inmates—locked up in five different prisons—are beginning to suffer the serious ill effects of a risky hunger strike that began for some as far back as July 12. The Mapuche, with an estimated population of 800,000, is Chile’s largest indigenous group.

On average, the strikers have already lost 12 kilograms each. Some dropped as many as 16 kg, physician Nelson Reyes told reporters Aug. 30. The jailed Mapuche, who are only now beginning to attract limited media attention, insist they are willing to carry out their protest until the bitter end if necessary.

"All other options to clamor for justice, to have access to fair legal proceedings, to have due process, have been exhausted," Héctor Llaitul, arguably the most well-known of the hunger strikers, explained in a recent interview with Mapuexpress. "This is the last thing we can do to get our message across. Our bodies are all we have left to protest."

Terrorizing the "terrorists"

Llaitul, leader of the organization Coordinadora Arauco-Malleco (CAM), is being held in the El Manzano prison in Concepción. He awaits trial on numerous charges that could eventually net him more than 100 years in combined prison sentences. Like his fellow hunger strikers, Llaitul is accused...
of organizing and/or participating in the kind of periodic arson attacks that have typified Chile’s "Mapuche conflict" during the past decade.

The attacks tend to target property belonging to large landholders or forestry companies operating in the Aurasucanía Region, an area in southcentral Chile the Mapuche consider their ancestral territory. Home to more than 30% of the country’s Mapuche population, the Araucanía is also the poorest of Chile’s 16 regions. The most recent such attack occurred Aug. 25, when two freight trucks were torched in the Aurasucanía.

Since CAM and other Mapuche groups began their activities in the late 1990s, neither the occasional arson attacks nor land occupations have resulted in a single non-Mapuche casualty. Heavy-handed police retaliations, in contrast, have in at least three high-profile cases spilled Mapuche blood. Last August a carabinero (uniformed police) officer shot and killed 24-year-old Jaime Facundo Mendoza Collío during an operation to evict Mapuche activists from a seized Araucanía farm (NotiSur, Nov. 13, 2009). Police killed 22-year-old Matías Catrileo in 2008. Teenager Alex Lemún died in 2003 after police shot him in the head.

Still, for the Chilean powers that be, Llaitul and the other Mapuche who have either been convicted or are locked up awaiting trial for their alleged involvement in the conflict are "terrorists." That was not always the case. Chilean authorities originally treated the property attacks as simple criminal matters. But during the administration of former President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), Chilean prosecutors began tackling the Mapuche conflict with a draconian law leftover from the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990).

Issued by decree in 1984, Law 19.027, known commonly as the anti-terrorism law, was originally designed to pursue armed political groups involved in kidnappings, attacks on police stations, and assassinations. Once Chile restored democracy, the Pinochet-era law seemed to lose its relevancy—until prosecutors recognized it as a powerful tool for clamping down on Mapuche property attacks. The "harshest" of all Chilean statutes, according to NY-based Human Rights Watch (HRW), the law stiffens sentences, denies defendants basic disclosure rights, and allows prosecutors to submit testimony from anonymous witnesses.

Lagos’ successor, President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010), originally promised not to apply Law 19.027 to the Mapuche conflict. Toward the end of Bachelet's term, however, her administration backtracked, allowing prosecutors to issue a flurry of anti-terrorism charges. The group Comisión Ética Contra la Tortura (CECT) reported in June that currently 57 Mapuches have either been convicted or are being prosecuted under Law 19.029.

A good portion of those Mapuche "terrorists" are now literally starving themselves to death in an effort not only to gain their freedom but to convince lawmakers to repeal the controversial terror law. The hunger strikers also demand that authorities stop the practice of prosecuting Mapuche in military courts.

"It's not at all enjoyable to be on [a hunger] strike. One suffers a lot. It’s hard," said Llaitul. "Nor is it good to make our families suffer. We’re the fathers, children, nephews, and grandsons of people who are all suffering. But we’ve considered this, and even though it seems paradoxical, the only way we can fight for life is by risking our own. I’m talking about the life of our people. [We’re fighting] for a better future for our children, for the rights of our nation. If by this means we get them to stop processing us under the anti-terrorism law, it will have been worth it."
For Piñera, mums the word

The striking Mapuche are not alone in criticizing Chile’s continued application of the dusted-off Pinochet-era law. Rights groups like HRW and Amnesty International (AI) have long complained that using Law 19.029 against Mapuches is not only inappropriate but also discriminatory. "The anti-terrorism law is inapplicable to these criminal acts [by Mapuche]," said HRW Director José Miguel Vivanco. "In addition, it violates Chile’s legal obligations to guarantee the right of due process to everyone, including Mapuche."

A handful of leftist legislators have also sided with the incarcerated hunger strikers. Sen. Alejandro Navarro, the sole congressional representative of the far-left Movimiento Amplio Social (MAS), recently visited some of the jailed Mapuche, as did Sen. Jaime Quintana of the Partido por la Democracia (PPD), who, concerned about the men’s deteriorating health, urged the Piñera administrative to address the issue and begin negotiations.

Chile’s Catholic Church has made a similar appeal. "In the midst of all this joy that we have for the situation of the miners in Copiapó, we believe that it’s necessary to make a similar gesture and begin negotiating, because the lives of the Mapuche are as important as those of the miners," Temuco Bishop Manuel Camilo Vial and Fr. Alfonso Baeza explained Aug. 26 in a joint statement.

President Piñera, in sharp contrast to his handling of the Copiapó rescue efforts, has so far been silent about the hunger strikers. Observers thought he might broach the subject during the Aug. 26 Encuentro Nacional de La Araucanía (ENELA), an annual business-leaders conference in Temuco. Piñera chose instead to limit his remarks to his "Plan Araucanía," a several-billion-dollar development scheme that promises to be the centerpiece of his administration’s Mapuche policy.

The business-first approach is designed to stimulate the Araucanía as a whole and thus bring Mapuches into the national fold by providing jobs, improving infrastructure, and advancing educational opportunities(NotiSur, July 9, 2010). Piñera likens the project to the post-World War II Marshall Plan, implemented by the US to held rebuild and develop war-ravaged Europe.

"It’s a new policy for stimulating production, because this isn’t just about handing out land; it’s about making the land productive," he said during the ENELA gathering. Piñera, a billionaire businessman, is Chile’s first conservative leader since Pinochet.

But on the final day of August, the Piñera administration finally moved to address the situation. Interior Minister Rodrigo Hinzpeter called on the hunger strikers to end their dangerous protest, promising in return that the government would submit a pair of bills aimed at "limiting the influence of the military-court system" and "perfecting" the anti-terrorism law.

"It is very important that societies have the best legal instrument possible to defend against terrorist crime," he said. "In this sense we are going to perfect our laws against terrorism, but we’re also going to seek dialogue to perfect these norms."

The administration’s gesture did not have the desired effect. While the skeptical strikers called for more concrete government action, two Mapuche teenagers in a southern juvenile-detention center announced they would be joining the hunger strike. The same day, Sept. 1, thousands of Mapuche and their supporters participated in marches throughout the country, including in the capital Santiago, where some 3,000 people demonstrated.
President Piñera, who has seen his popularity rise significantly as a result of the Copiapó miracle, is no doubt hoping in both cases to avoid ending up with blood on his hands. In the case of the stranded miners, the president is employing every resource available to keep the men alive. But their survival will also depend on a healthy dose of luck.

For the striking Mapuche, in contrast, Piñera has the power to end the drama immediately, though doing so will require him to cede a fair amount of ideological ground. The question is, will he?

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