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Chile President and Opposition Trade Barbs while Earthquake Victims Wait for Solutions

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Nine months after one of the strongest earthquakes in recorded history jolted central Chile, the disaster has returned to the national forefront as fodder in a mudslinging match between the country’s increasingly popular President Sebastián Piñera and a weakened opposition eager to find a chink in the first-year leader’s political armor.

The massive magnitude 8.8 quake and subsequent tsunami struck Feb. 27 (NotiSur, March 12, 2010), less than two weeks before Piñera took office (NotiSur, March 26, 2010). The back-to-back disasters killed 521 people and caused an estimated US$30 billion in damages, destroying homes, bridges, and other structures throughout Chile’s central regions.

When Piñera assumed the presidency March 11, he took leadership of a country still shaking—both figuratively and literally (the inauguration ceremony was interrupted by a series of powerful aftershocks)—from its worst catastrophe in a generation. Calling himself the "reconstruction president," the conservative leader promised to focus tirelessly on putting the country back on its feet. Few observers expected the new president to dedicate himself to much else, at least during his first year in office.

Reasons to celebrate

Since then, however, President Piñera—and the nation as a whole—has had plenty of distractions from February’s monster earthquake. In June, Chileans celebrated the successes of their beloved La Roja football team, which made its first World Cup appearance in a dozen years. Three months later, the country commemorated its bicentennial. And, in October, television audiences around the globe joined Chile in rejoicing in the storybook rescue of 33 now-world-famous miners who had spent more than two months trapped deep underground in Chile’s desert north.

The panorama of events has proven to be propitious for President Piñera, who has seen his approval ratings surge of late. A survey published in early November by the polling firm Adimark measured support for the president at 63%—up from just 46% in April.

Piñera has indeed been on a political hot streak in recent months. Despite the devastating earthquake, Chile’s economy is humming along at the moment, bolstering the president’s already well-established reputation as a savvy money manager. Economists predict year-end growth figures of more than 5%, a remarkable turnaround after last year’s recession.

To the surprise of would-be critics, the conservative president—Chile’s first rightist leader since dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990)—has also drawn positive reviews on both the environmental and human rights fronts. In late August, he stepped in personally to block construction of an unpopular coal-burning power-plant project (NotiSur, Sept. 17, 2010). Two months later, his administration successfully negotiated an end to a dangerous hunger strike involving nearly 40 indigenous prisoners (NotiSur, Nov. 19, 2010).
**Feeling Forgotten**

Still, the biggest feather in the new president’s cap is no doubt October’s successful mine rescue, which earned him accolades both at home and abroad. At the same time, however, Piñera’s enthusiastic stewardship of the northern rescue has also exposed a potential weakness—one that is proving to be a tempting target for members of the opposition Concertación coalition.

Across the wide swath of territory hammered by the earthquake and tsunami, signs of discontent among people left homeless or out of work are starting to bubble to the surface. A recurring question for many victims is why, after proving so adept at addressing the needs of 33 trapped miners, has the government and its "reconstruction" president been so apparently lax in executing earthquake-recovery efforts.

"We’ve been forgotten," Cecilia Vallejos, the resident-association president for a makeshift housing settlement in Talcahuano, told England’s The Telegraph. "Watching all the attention given to the miners just emphasized that. Of course we, like all Chileans, were so pleased when they came out. But their hell is over after two months. We are still living ours."

Talcahuano, a port town in the Biobío Region (near the earthquake’s epicenter), was one of several coastal communities more or less razed by the quake and tsunami. After living in tents for the first three months, Vallejos and her approximately 600 neighbors in the city’s El Morro settlement now occupy cramped mediaguas (rudimentary wooden shacks). Shower facilities are scarce (about one for every four families). Drinking water comes from a pump on the edge of the settlement. Residents say they have no privacy.

North of Talcahuano, in the coastal community of Constitución, residents from another emergency settlement took their frustrations to the streets Nov. 16, seizing the city’s main highway in a desperate attempt to draw the government’s attention.

"We’re sick and tired of so much paperwork, so many lies," Pablo Diaz, president of Constitución’s Cerro O’Higgins settlement, told . "In the case of my committee, we’ve been to Santiago twice to speak with [Housing and Urban Development Minister Magdalena Matte]. They tell us one thing, but after a few days they change everything they promised us. It’s been many months, and there’s still no progress. At least in Constitución, there’s nothing to see. They haven’t built a single residence since the earthquake."

**Playing the blame game**

Members of the Concertación, a center-left coalition that governed Chile for two decades before losing the past election, blame the lingering problems on the Piñera government in general and Minister Matte in particular. Starting in late October, opposition leaders began suggesting that Matte be made to testify before the Chamber of Deputies. Concertación deputies formalized the threat Dec. 2, setting the stage for an upcoming congressional appearance by Matte later in the month.

"With the same force that Chile applauds the mining minister [for the successful mine rescue], we have to be very strict with the housing minister, very strict with all the ministers in charge of the earthquake [recovery effort]," Marco Enríquez-Ominami, a former presidential candidate and Partido Socialista (PS) deputy, told reporters.
Circling their wagons around the embattled housing minister, Piñera, his Cabinet members, and allies in the conservative Alianza coalition fired back, accusing the Concertación of using the issue for purely political gain. "The only thing [the opposition] wants is that nothing gets rebuilt, since it favors their electoral interests," Piñera told reporters Nov. 10.

Whether pure politics or not, the Concertación’s offensive did seem to strike a chord with the president, who—accompanied by several of his top Cabinet ministers—set off in the final days of October on a Gira de la Reconstrucción, a whistle-stop tour of several of the communities hardest hit by the earthquake.

Less than two weeks later, Piñera travelled to the far north of the country, delivering a political counteroffensive by announcing plans to include the coastal city of Tocopilla in its overall reconstruction plans. Tocopilla, in the northern Antofagasta region, was hit by a powerful magnitude 7.7 quake in November 2007, during the administration of President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010), the last of four consecutive Concertación presidents.

"In a few days, we’re going to celebrate the third anniversary of the Tocopilla earthquake. There were 4,500 families affected. They are still 2,000 solutions short. Six schools were destroyed. Today, four still haven’t been rebuilt," Piñera, poking holes in the Concertación’s own disaster-response record, told reporters Nov. 10.

Interior Minister Rodrigo Hinzpeter launched an even more blatant attack two days later when he said that, had Piñera’s government responded to February’s quake the way Bachelet’s handled the Tocopilla disaster, "the people in the south of Chile would have their houses in the year 2080."

Waiting and waiting

What is not clear is how—or if—the war of words between the Piñera administration and its detractors will benefit residents in Talcahuano, Constitución, or any of the other towns and cities badly hit by the earthquake and tsunami.

Of immediate concern are the thousands still living in emergency settlements like El Morro or Cerro O’Higgins, where permanent, decent housing solutions have simply not yet materialized.

Serious problems also persist with the earthquake zone’s network of hospitals. The disaster completely destroyed 13 hospitals and damaged 40 others. There have been significant delays in replacing the ruined facilities with temporary prefabricated hospitals, which were supposed to be in place already but are not expected to be completed until next April. New permanent facilities will come much later. In the meantime, several communities are still treating patients in field hospitals.

"In winter, we couldn’t stand the cold. Now, we can’t handle the heat," Sara Muñoz, a field-hospital nurse in Constitución, told the daily . "The patients feel desperate. Add to that problems with the bathrooms. Sometimes there isn’t water."

Unemployment is also a problem. In early November, the government announced it was ending an emergency work program that had employed upwards of 10,000 people in earthquake-cleanup efforts. Suddenly jobless, roughly 2,000 people from the Biobío region travelled to Santiago and Valparaíso in early November to protest the government’s decision.

"It’s difficult," Constitución Mayor Hugo Tillería told Radio Cooperativa Nov. 28, one day after the quake’s nine-month anniversary. "I understand the anguish, that people feel disheartened. And if
we don’t follow through with a strong and rapid action plan, this is going to turn into a debacle for which I’d rather not be present."

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