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Chilean President Sebastián Piñera Rattled by Reconstruction Questions on Quake Anniversary

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A year after slamming a huge swath of central Chile, last February’s massive magnitude 8.8 earthquake (NotiSur, March 12, 2010) continues to leave President Sebastián Piñera on shaky political ground.

Despite being one of the largest quakes in recorded history, the Feb. 27 disaster—which prompted a tsunami and killed approximately 550 people—became old news relatively quickly in Chile, where people were willing distracted first by football (the national team performed well in the World Cup) and later by September’s bicentennial celebrations. In the south, a group of indigenous Mapuche prisoners made news with a dangerous hunger strike (NotiSur, Sept. 10, 2010). And in the north, the saga of 33 miners who spent 70 days trapped deep underground dominated headlines not only in Chile but across the globe.

The action-packed scenario seemed to suit the new president. Applauded internationally for his handling of the mine rescue, Piñera also scored political points on the human rights and environmental fronts for successfully negotiating an end to the Mapuche hunger strike (NotiSur, Nov. 19, 2010) and for stepping in personally to block construction of an unpopular coal-burning electricity plant (NotiSur, Sept. 17, 2010). By November, Piñera—Chile’s first conservative leader after two decades of center-left government—saw his approval rating rise to 63%.

In recent months, however, the billionaire president seems to have lost his Midas touch. A tragic Santiago prison fire in December (NotiSur, Jan. 21, 2011), bloody confrontations between police and indigenous activists on Easter Island (NotiSur, Feb. 18, 2011), and a general strike in southern Patagonia because of proposed natural-gas rate hikes have combined to tarnish Piñera’s once-gleaming political armor.

But perhaps the president’s biggest problem has been a recent refocusing of national attention on last February’s all-but-forgotten earthquake, which struck just 13 days before Piñera took office (NotiSur, March 26, 2010).

Eager to cut the increasingly popular president down to size, opposition leaders began late last year to publicly question the administration’s handling of the reconstruction effort (NotiSur, Dec. 10, 2010). Particular criticism was directed at Housing Minister Magdalena Matte, who has the daunting task of providing housing solutions for tens of thousands left homeless by the US$30 billion disaster.

Piñera and his Cabinet ministers dismissed the criticism as partisan grandstanding. Nevertheless, with the approach of last month’s one-year anniversary of the deadly quake and tsunami, public scrutiny increased, putting the president and his allies squarely on the defensive.

Progress in numbers

President Piñera is standing by his government’s reconstruction record, boasting that the task of rebuilding Chile’s damaged houses, schools, hospitals, and bridges is already "more
than 50% complete." Minister Matte has offered her own set of facts and figures, claiming the government already approved some 130,000 housing subsidies and has begun construction on 70,000 new residences. By the end of 2011, Matte says, the state will have provided 220,000 subsidies (theoretically one for every family left homeless by the disaster) and furnished 80,000 families with new homes.

"We’ve advanced at an incredible rhythm," she explained in a March 1 interview with. "I think that in time, given the way we’re advancing, this is going to be a model of how to go about reconstructing."

In the days leading up to the anniversary, President Piñera took his message on the road with a whistle-stop tour of damaged towns and cities in the Maule and Biobío regions, the areas hardest hit by the quake and tsunami. The president completed the trip with a Feb. 27 memorial address in the devastated coastal city of Constitución, where he told gatherers that his government "has done everything humanly possible."

"We are not only rebuilding the material things that the earthquake and tsunami destroyed, but we also need to heal the tremendous wound so many people have suffered. In fact, healing this wound is possibly the most important aspect of the reconstruction process," Piñera added.

Waiting for solutions

Not everyone is buying the billionaire president’s message. In Constitución, some frustrated residents booed Piñera during his speech. The previous day, several thousand demonstrators took to the streets of Concepción, Chile’s second-largest city. Earlier in the week, the president, protected by a large contingent of carabineros (uniformed police), faced vocal protests in the town of Dichato as well. "I come in peace," he said. Carabineros later arrested eight demonstrators, according to news reports.

For many of the quake’s direct victims, the president’s claim to have done "everything humanly possible" simply rings false—particularly when it comes to housing. What help did arrive during the past year, they insist, came mostly from private sources: friends, family members, corporations, sports clubs, and other donors.

"Here it’s just been questions and consultations. That’s it. No help," said Luis Corona, a mechanic working out of an abandoned freight container in Constitución’s much-affected El Pozo neighborhood. "What we have had is a lot of help from individuals. But from the government, nothing. It’s all been through the efforts of friends and family members. The people are lifting themselves back up. That’s it. We can’t expect anything else."

For thousands of quake victims in Constitución and elsewhere, the government did provide one vital emergency service: rudimentary wooden huts called . Certainly an improvement over the tents many occupied for the first two or three months after the disaster, the were nevertheless supposed to be just a temporary housing solution while the state assigned subsidies and built permanent residences.

Those long-term housing solutions, however, have yet to materialize for most of the mediagua dwellers, who are now preparing to spend a second frigid winter in their drafty and often leaky shacks, where drinking water is scarce in some cases, the shared showers cold, the collective porta-potties foul smelling and in short supply.
"In this sector, which was completely leveled by the tsunami, we were the last to receive our [emergency] housing. We got it two and a half months after. Before that, we just lived in tents," said Nieve Vergara, a community leader in El Pozo. "That’s the only thing we’ve gotten from the government. It’s true what they say, that they installed electricity and drinking water, but that was four months later, because of the fight we put up. We made them do it."

**A matter of perspective**

Assessing the progress of Chile’s reconstruction is clearly a matter of perspective—a classic case of seeing the glass half empty or half full, depending on who’s looking.

President Piñera is urging the public to focus on the "more than 50%" of the work that’s already been done. In 12 months, the country certainly has made significant advancements. The disaster’s most immediate legacy, mountains of debris up and down city streets or heaped along the coastline, have for the most part been cleared. Roads and bridges have been repaired. Schools and hospitals reopened. Overall, the economy grew by more than 5% in 2010, an impressive figure considering the disaster’s monumental material losses.

Still, residents in Constitución and other badly hurt areas can be forgiven for not sharing the same rosy view of the reconstruction process. According to the Ministerio de Vivienda, approximately 4,200 people are still living in , which are grouped in makeshift townships called . The state erected 107 such after the quake. Ninety-nine remain. Minister Matte’s latest promise is to eliminate the remaining townships by mid-2012—15 months from now.

For weary families who have already spent a long year in uncertain and uncomfortable conditions, that’s a long time to wait. And Minister Matte’s assurances aside, it is unlikely all of the current aldea residents will end up with decent, permanent housing.

The Santiago-based investigative-journalism nongovernmental organization (NGO) Centro de Investigación e Información Periodística (CIPER) expects that as many 40% to 45% of people currently in the will fail to qualify for government subsidies and thus fall through the system’s cracks.

There are countless other earthquake victims who don’t appear in government statistics—people who have moved in with friends and family or who could afford to find new lodgings yet are unlikely to ever recoup the losses they suffered.

"I did all the paperwork at the municipality in Lincantén, but I don’t qualify for government help because of my education level and because once I did have some money. I don’t qualify," said Omar Castro, a retired business owner whose Lloca tourism complex was washed away by the tsunami.

"We don’t have any money. We’re retired. I didn’t have insurance....These materials here were given to me by a friend," Castro added, pointing to a pile of used lumber. "It’s scrap material. We’re going to rebuild the house with scrap wood."

It’s difficult to measure how the Chilean public as a whole views the reconstruction effort. In Santiago, home to roughly one-third of the country’s population, evidence of last year’s quake has all but disappeared. Business is booming. For many Santiaguinos, the problems in Maule and Biobío no doubt seem far away. Nevertheless, if Piñera’s latest approval numbers (42% and falling) are any
evidence, people are increasingly finding the government’s "glass is half full" perspective hard to swallow.

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