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Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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All Eyes on Aysén: Tense Talks Follow Unrest in Chile’s Far South

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
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The most sparsely populated of Chile’s 15 regions, Aysén is in many ways the most isolated as well. In recent weeks, however, a burst of popular unrest has lifted the normally out of sight, out of mind outpost to the top of President Sebastián Piñera’s priority list.

Frustrated by what they insist has been a long history of neglect by Chile’s Santiago-based central government, activists in Aysén launched a series of protests beginning Feb. 13, when a group of artisan fishers occupied an airport landing strip on the island of Melinka. The following day, protestors barricaded the road between Puerto Aysén, one of the far-southern region’s principal cities, and nearby Puerto Chacabuco.

Authorities in Santiago—some 1,600 km to the north—responded by dispatching heavily armed riot police, who clashed with demonstrators in and around Puerto Aysén. The unrest quickly spread to other parts of the region, including Coyhaique, home to about half of Aysén’s 100,000 residents. More police repression followed, turning the violent demonstrations into a national and highly politicized affair that continues to dominate headlines.

Workers, artisan fishers, students, environmentalists, and others involved in the Movimiento Social por Aysén, the suddenly high-profile umbrella group leading the demonstrations, say the cost of living in the isolated region, which is only accessible from the north by air or sea, is untenable. The situation is further complicated, they say, by a general lack of good employment opportunities.

Compared with residents in Santiago, people in Aysén pay almost 9% more for gasoline (US$1.73 per liter versus US$1.59), 11% more for bread (US$2.27 per kg versus US$2.04), and 65% more for electricity. Those differences can be especially galling for someone trying to scrape by on Chile’s minimum wage—roughly US$375 per month—which is standard for all regions.

"When Chile shows off its impressive numbers, its great [growth] figures, when it presents itself as an emerging country, that’s not something we all feel first hand. Especially those of us who live on the mainland and yet still have to go through a foreign country [Argentina] to get anywhere. Even though we’re on the mainland, we’re an island," the Movimiento’s main spokesperson Iván Fuentes told the BBC.

Among other things, members of the Movimiento Social por Aysén demand that the central government offer subsidies to reduce fuel costs, improve local health services, follow through on promises to better connect the region to the mainland, provide Aysén with a quality university, and allow residents a greater say in major investment projects like the controversial HidroAysén hydroelectric dam venture (NotiSur, Oct. 17, 2008).
Three weeks of "unacceptable repression"

Still on his summer vacation when the problems in Aysén began, President Piñera cut his holiday short and returned to Santiago on Feb. 19. He immediately sent Minister of Health Jaime Mañalich and Minister of Transport Pedro Pablo Errázuriz to negotiate with the protestors.

Encouraged that the matter could be resolved quickly, Mañalich said his first meeting with representatives of the Movimiento ended with a "complete agreement." It is necessary, he told reporters Feb. 20, "that other ministers continue coming to the region so that we can go about resolving one by one the issues that are bothering the citizens."

In the meantime, however, carabineros (uniformed police) flown in from the north continued to engage in daily clashes with demonstrators. Human rights observers chronicled numerous abuse cases. Forty-nine-year-old Teófilo Haros lost an eye after being shot in the face by police. Many others sustained impact wounds from rubber bullets and in some cases metal pellets fired by police. And in Coyhaique, police used one of their armored jeeps to run down 22-year-old Camilo Pallapán, whom they later beat with sticks.

"The streets are burning," Elías Muñoz, a reporter with a Coyhaique-based Radio Santa María, told the online news site El Mostrador. "We’ve never seen anything like this before. I don’t think this will end well. The people are losing patience."

Demanding an end to the police repression, a group of some 50 public workers temporarily occupied Coyhaique’s main police station on Feb. 22. The heavy-handed police tactics also drew rebukes from Amnesty International (AI) and from Deputy Sergio Ojeda, head of the human rights commission in the Cámara de Diputados, who visited Aysén.

"After speaking with the leaders [of the Movimiento], with the bishop [Luis Infanti], and with people who have been injured during these demonstrations, the testimonies are clear and the facts point to an unacceptable repression," Ojeda, a member of the centrist Demócrata Cristiano (DC) party, told reporters March 3.

Minister Mañalich’s hopes for a quick resolution to the conflict proved overly optimistic as the impasse dragged on throughout the month of February and into March. President Piñera sent a third Cabinet member, Energy Minister Rodrigo Álvarez, to Aysén on Feb. 27, but he too returned to Santiago empty handed.

By the end of the first week in March, however, the two sides did finally reach something of an understanding. On March 6—after insisting just the day before that it would not negotiate "on its knees"—the Movimiento accepted the government’s demand that it lift its many roadblocks. In exchange, the sustained government agreed to engage in a "constructive, respectful, and reasonable dialogue that allows [both sides] to advance satisfactorily toward meeting the pending needs," said Andrés Chadwick, the Piñera administration’s top spokesperson.

In statements issued the following day, Chadwick warned the people of Aysén not to expect answers within "just a couple of days." Many of the demands, he explained, are "gradual problems" that require legislative proposals or collaboration between different ministries.
More trouble on the horizon

How gradual an approach Aysén’s Movimiento is willing to accept from the government is anybody’s guess. As of press time, talks remained tense. But even if this week’s tenuous truce proves lasting, President Piñera would be hard-pressed to chalk it up as a victory.

Politically, the Aysén uprising—and that it took his government more than three weeks to "resolve" it—was a blow the already unpopular president can ill afford. Piñera’s approval rating is currently in the low 30% range, making him an easy target for opposition leaders and civil-society organizations.

Piñera has plenty of critics on the right as well. Sen. Antonio Horvath of the center-right Renovación Nacional (RN) repeatedly questioned the administration’s handling of the crisis in Aysén, as did Deputy David Sandoval of the far-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), who accused the state of being "very irresponsible in the extreme zones."

A second problem for Piñera is that the unrest in Aysén puts more pressure on his administration to answer pending citizen demands in other "extreme zones," including in the far-southern region of Magallanes and in the city of Calama, in Chile’s desert north.

A year ago Magallanes residents carried out raucous anti-government demonstrations of their own, erecting roadblocks and occupying a major port after the Piñera administration announced it would cut natural-gas subsidies. The government ended the standoff by promising to keep the subsidies in place—for the time being—and to work with locals to establish an official guideline for gas prices.

Deemed a top priority at the time, the new gas law was supposed to be approved by Congress before last September. Six months later, "there hasn’t been any progress on the gas law," according to Sen. Carlos Bianchi, an independent. "It's still in the Cámara de Diputados, and it was never treated with any urgency."

Magallanes organizers admit they are keeping a close eye on how things unfold in Aysén. The same is true in Calama, which also saw major demonstrations last year. On June 29, 2011, some 20,000 Calama residents took to the streets demanding better infrastructure and services. Activists in the high-desert city also want the government to give Calama a portion of the revenue generated by CODELCO, the state-run copper giant, which operates nearby.

Calama Mayor Esteban Velásquez says the city has not forgotten about those demands and is prepared to carry out a new round of protests—starting in April—if the Piñera administration fails to answer. "The April demonstrations could definitely be like those in Aysén," Velásquez told CNN Chile last week.

Trying to juggle the demands of the frustrated residents in Aysén, Magallanes, and Calama will no doubt be a tall order for the conservative president, who officially began his third year in office on March 11. It will be next to impossible if the country’s university and high school students decide to relaunch their own potent movement.

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