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Poverty, Neglect Fuel Deadly Firestorm in Chile’s Valparaíso

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A furious wildfire burned its way through several Valparaíso neighborhoods last month, killing 15 people and leaving more than 12,000 homeless. Chile’s second major disaster in as many weeks, the fire also served as a painful reminder that, for many, the country’s much-heralded economic "miracle" is still very much a mirage.

President Michelle Bachelet said the blaze was "perhaps the worst fire in the history of Valparaíso," a hilly port city with a long record of deadly fires. The region’s intendente (appointed governor), Ricardo Bravo, came up with an even more memorable description. In an April 13 interview with Radio Cooperativa, Bravo dubbed it "the perfect fire" because of an unlikely confluence of climate-related circumstances. Temperatures on April 12, when the fire broke out, were unseasonably high. There was a steady wind. And the surrounding foliage, thanks to a several-year rain deficit that has affected much of Central Chile (NotiSur, April 11, 2014), was particularly parched. "Everything came together at once," Bravo said.

Not all factors contributing to the firestorm’s rapid advance, however, can be blamed on Mother Nature. As many observers have since pointed out, poverty and poor planning also played a major role in the inferno, which laid waste to several of the city’s most marginalized neighborhoods but spared its UNESCO-designated downtown. In total, some 3,000 homes were destroyed in the fire, which torched approximately 1,000 hectares, an area roughly three times the size of New York City’s Central Park.

The hilltop communities hardest hit by the disaster are divided by ravines that serve as informal garbage dumps. The waste helped fuel the conflagration, as did the bottled-gas canisters residents use for cooking and heating. The homes were also highly combustible. Most of the ruined residences were built with light, inexpensive materials that succumbed easily to the flames. Poor infrastructure played a role as well. Roads in some of the neighborhoods are too narrow to accommodate fire engines. Even when firefighters could get through, they found there were no water hydrants.

"The fire in Valparaíso could be seen as a tragic natural disaster that caused massive damage without any distinction," Ignacia Ossul and Rafael Silva, former directors of the anti-poverty organization Techo-Valparaíso, wrote in a recent opinion piece published by the online news site El Mostrador. "But if you take a look at who was most affected, the unjust reality is that ‘the losers,’ in this case, were the same people who always lose: the region’s poorest families."

"Veritable ghettos"

Known for its brightly-colored homes, iconic hillside elevators, and cherished history as one of the South Pacific’s most important seaports (particularly in the pre-Panama Canal era), Valparaíso is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and major tourist destination. But it is also very much a working city. Valparaíso—or Valpo as it is often called—has been home to the Chilean Congress since 1990, boasts the country’s second-most-important port (after nearby San Antonio), and,
together with neighboring Viña del Mar, is Chile’s second-most-populous metropolitan area, with roughly 800,000 inhabitants.

Valparaíso, a city of artists and sailors, and Viña del Mar, with its flashy beachfront condos, casino, and upscale restaurants, are a study in contrasts. They complement each other, however, when it comes to the kind of imagery Chile uses to market itself to the world: that of a culturally rich country with a colorful past and—thanks to a prolonged period of economic growth that has endowed it with Latin America’s highest per capita income (between US$15,000 and US$20,000, depending on estimates)—an even brighter future.

Missing from that image, though, are the deeply impoverished communities—like the ones that burned in last month’s firestorm—that exist on the outskirts of Valparaíso, Viña del Mar, Santiago, and other major Chilean cities. Some of those communities are mere "campamentos," shantytowns constructed haphazardly by residents drawn to the major metropolitan areas for their resources and opportunities but lacking the means to access formal housing on planned streets, with fire hydrants and regular trash-collection services.

"When one looks at Valparaíso from afar, whether by day or night, it’s beautiful. The buildings facing the pedestrian areas in the port are well-put-together. But beyond that, further up in the hills, there is a lot of poverty, makeshift [constructions], and urban segregation," urban planner and Universidad Católica professor Iván Poduje told BBC Mundo. "One shouldn’t idealize what is quite simply hard poverty."

In a study he published in 2010, Poduje identified several other communities where Chileans live in similarly difficult conditions. The list includes Chimba Alto, in the northern city of Antofagasta; Alerce, outside the southern city of Puerto Montt; and Bajos de Mena, in outlying Santiago. The study, titled Guetos en Chile (Ghettos in Chile), concluded that "some 1.7 million Chileans [10% of the population] live in urban settlements with high levels of segregation, poverty, and marginalization. In some cases, they’re veritable ghettos."

Sounding the alarm

Adding to the tragedy in Valparaíso is evidence that city authorities knew of the dangers beforehand but failed—because of budget constraints—to carry out even the most basic preventative measures.

Ricardo Valdés, the city’s emergency chief, addressed the issue head on during a City Council meeting held Dec. 12, 2012, the Centro de Investigación Periodística (CIPER), an investigative-journalism site, noted in an article published April 17. "We have a problem: the continual lack of resources to face emergencies that, in our case, tend to translate into disasters," he said. "Everything affects us. If there’s a strong wind, a wall comes down. A few drops of rain and we get mudslides."

One of Valdés’ biggest concerns was precisely the kind of scenario that played out last month: a massive-scale fire that begins in the wooded outskirts and then migrates, uncontrollably, into and across the city. The best way to prevent such a disaster, he told the City Council, is to maintain an effective firebreak by regularly clearing trees, brush, and trash around the city’s periphery and in the ravines that separate the various hilltop neighborhoods. "We’ve probably done about 5% or 6% of that work," he estimated. "The rest hasn’t been completed because of to a lack of resources."

Two months later, Valparaíso was struck by just the kind of fire Valdés had predicted. The February 2013 blaze destroyed 300 residences and left 1,200 people homeless. Nine months after that, the
Valparaíso mayor’s office filed a formal request—from the central government—for 400 million pesos (approximately US$800,000) to hire more personnel, upgrade its fire-prevention equipment, and, in particular, remove the "residential waste that has collected in the city’s ravines." Mayor Jorge Castro, a member of the far-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), claims he made a prior plea for funds just before the February fire. CIPER was only able to corroborate the second request. Either way, the funds never materialized.

Valparaíso’s budget problems go back decades, in large part because of corruption (involving leaders from all political stripes), the CIPER article alleged. In 2004, when Hernán Pinto, the city’s first post-dictatorship mayor, left office, Valparaíso had a debt of more than US$15 million, double what it had been just two years earlier. Pinto, who was originally appointed to the job, represented the centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC). Under his successors, Aldo Cornejo (PDC) and Castro (UDI), the city’s debt has grown even more: it now stands at US$70 million, CIPER reported.

Three-step response

The disaster represents an enormous challenge for the Bachelet government, which also has its hands full responding to a magnitude 8.2 earthquake that struck far northern Chile on April 1, less than two weeks before the Valparaíso blaze broke out.

Firefighters spent days trying to control the flames and stamp out new flare-ups. President Bachelet, in the meantime, dispatched soldiers to evacuate parts of the city and protect businesses and homes from looting. She also formed a special task force, headed by Andrés Silva, to oversee the city’s "transition" and eventual reconstruction.

In a recent interview with La Tercera, Silva explained that the government is operating a three-step response. The initial task was to extinguish the fire completely and make sure the people left homeless had some kind of temporary lodging, whether in emergency shelters or in the private homes of people who volunteered to house the victims. Military work crews are also busy clearing out rubble so that the city can return to some semblance of normalcy.

The second phase involves the distribution of various subsidios, direct government payouts available to people who provide shelter to victims (approximately US$200), to people needing help renting a home or apartment (approximately US$300), and to victims needing to re-equip their residences with basic amenities (approximately US$2,000 per family). As of May 8, the government has spent close to US$1 million on such payouts and provided nearly 1,400 provisional homes, according to Silva.

The final phase—which could take several years—will be to reconstruct the homes and neighborhoods destroyed in the blaze. The government is promising not just to rebuild but to redesign, to make sure that the new homes are not as vulnerable and off-the-grid as the ones that burned. "It’s not enough to reinstall houses or support families," said Bachelet. "We have to do something more substantive."

Authorities will have to do more than that, however, if they really want to protect Chile’s most vulnerable citizens from future calamities, argue a number of observers. "Valparaíso is a sad example that [Chile] is a reactive county that only acts after a tragedy has occurred," veteran human rights journalist Jorge Escalante argued in a recent essay. "The initiatives and laws appear after each disaster. After the death. After the pain. After the crime."
"Let’s be clear: Chile is a country that touts its place among the developed nations when in reality we’re still undeveloped," Escalante added. "The leaders go around telling the whole world about how we have a per capita income of US$18,000 or US$20,000. But where are all those thousands of dollars in the hills of Valparaíso and in the miserable slums of Santiago and other provinces?"

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