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Chile Grapples With Unsettling And Unexplained Bomb Attacks

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A long string of low-intensity bomb attacks has left Chilean authorities scratching their heads, politicians pointing fingers, and residents—particularly in Santiago, where explosions in September killed one person and injured more than a dozen others—very much on edge.

The incidents, involving makeshift devices such as fire extinguishers packed with gunpowder, began nearly a decade ago and tend to take place late at night when the targets, in many cases bank outlets, are closed. Homemade bombs have also been planted in and around police stations, Army barracks, embassies, political-party headquarters, government buildings, corporate offices, and even churches. In total, approximately 200 such devices have either exploded or been detected and dismantled since 2005, when the attacks started.

Until recently, the bombs caused only material damage—with two exceptions, both involving people presumed to be planning and executing the attacks. In 2009, an alleged anarchist named Mauricio Morales died when the explosive he was carrying in his backpack accidentally detonated. Two years later, another anarchist was maimed while planting a bomb outside a Santiago bank. The wounded perpetrator, Luciano Pitronello, was charged and convicted but ultimately given a suspended sentence.

Last month, however, the relatively benign pattern of the attacks underwent a dramatic change, starting with an explosion that injured 14 people, two of them seriously, in a Santiago subway-station complex. Unlike past attacks, the Sept. 8 explosion took place at midday and in a location frequented by as many as 150,000 people per day. The station, in the capital’s upscale Las Condes district, is adjacent to the Escuela Militar, a prestigious Army officer-training academy. "We heard the blast and ran in fear," Silvana Bobadilla, a Peruvian woman who witnessed the attack, told a local television reporter. "When I turned around I saw the heartbreaking scene: there was glass, dust, and twisted metal everywhere."

The next day, a small explosion injured a supermarket custodian in the coastal city of Viña del Mar. And, on Sept. 25, for the first time since the bombs began in 2005, an explosion claimed an innocent life. The attack occurred in Yungay, a working-class neighborhood in Santiago. Chilean officials confirmed just last week that the victim, a 29-year-old homeless man named Sergio Landskron, was not a would-be bomber but rather a passerby who was fatally injured when he unwittingly picked up a backpack containing the device.

"Terrorists and cowards"

For authorities and residents alike, the September explosions marked a turning point in what the media has long referred to as the caso bombas (the bombs case). The string of attacks went from being a troubling and costly nuisance to a clear and present danger. The mayhem at the Escuela Militar station, in particular, sent the message that explosions can now occur at any time, anywhere, and that innocent bystanders risk serious injury or worse.
The government, led by President Michelle Bachelet, was quick to denounce the subway attack as an act of "terror" and promised that in pursuing the perpetrators it would invoke the country's controversial anti-terrorism law. The law, decreed during the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), allows for harsher sentences and provides prosecutors with a number of special privileges, including the use of wiretaps and anonymous witnesses. It has been used in recent years—much to the dismay of human rights advocates—to crack down on Mapuche indigenous activists fighting to recover ancestral lands in central Chile's Biobío and Araucanía regions (NotiSur, March 13, 2009, and July 9, 2010).

"We won’t allow a small group of terrorists and cowards to affect the lives of the vast majority of men and women who want a safe, prosperous, and peaceful country," President Bachelet said Sept. 9.

There is also a general impression that the events have become more frequent. In mid-July, in Santiago, a bomb went off in a subway car. The explosion occurred at about midnight, not long after the train had completed its last journey of the day. Thanks to the subway driver, who sounded the alarm after discovering the device while doing a final walk-through of the train, no one was hurt.

Later that month, a bomb exploded outside a downtown Santiago church. Pamphlets left at the scene of the crime expressed solidarity with a pair of known Chilean anarchists who were detained in Spain last year in connection with a church bombing in the city of Zaragoza. The very next morning police discovered—and were fortunately able to deactivate—an explosive device planted near a day-care center. In August, two different police stations were attacked.

**Eyeing the anarchists**

In mid September, investigators arrested three people (two men and one woman, all in their 20s) suspected of carrying out the two subway attacks. Two are being held in preventative custody while prosecutors continue to collect evidence. The other was placed under house arrest. Days earlier, police in the northern city of Antofagasta arrested three men found to be transporting heavy explosives.

Authorities hailed the arrests as major advances in cracking the perplexing case. The arrests of the suspected subway bombers, President Bachelet told reporters on Sept. 18, Chile’s national independence day, "shows us that coordinated, professional, and permanent work is the way to get to the bottom of these incidents and punish, with the full force of the law, the people who are found to be responsible."

When it comes to the bombing phenomenon as a whole, however, there are still plenty of unanswered questions. The standard hypothesis is that the attacks are being authored by so-called anarchist groups whose members, as Santiago prosecutor Raul Guzmán recently opined, are "anti-system and are not organized hierarchically."

Dozens of these alleged groups have claimed responsibility through the years for different bombing attacks. An organization calling itself the Célula Revolucionaria Felice Orsini, for example, claimed to be behind the July church attack. Other group names that have surfaced in recent years include Amigos de la Pólvora (friends of gunpowder); Grupo Armado y Desalmado Jean Marc Rouillan, named after a jailed French activist; and Fracción Autónoma de Ataque León Czolgosz, in reference to an anarchist who murdered US President William McKinley (1897-1901). Authorities are
reportedly unclear, at this point, whether the various groups are affiliated, or whether the attackers are in fact just one group using multiple names.

The anarchist explanation was echoed in a report published in August by the US Department of State’s Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), which describes the situation in Chile as "small-scale domestic terrorist activity." The attacks involve "improvised explosive devices (IEDs)" and tend to have "anti-systemic, anti-globalization, or pro-Indigenous Chilean undertones," according the OSAC.

**Competing theories**

Members of Chile’s right-wing opposition have begun using the attacks to score political points against the center-left Bachelet administration. Commenting on the OSAC report, Deputy Gustavo Hasbún of the hard-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) said the US government analysis is "correct" and spells out "what the vast majority of Chileans—except the government of Michelle Bachelet—already knows: that terrorism exists in Chile." The report’s use of the word "domestic terrorism," he added, "refers to the fact that there are cells or subversive groups that operate in Chile and that are anarchist or linked to the extreme left."

Others, however, question whether the attacks are instead being authored by far-right elements bent on destabilizing the country and thus discrediting the left-leaning governments that, with the exception of the administration of President Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014), have led the country since democracy was restored in 1990. The bombers could be following a pattern set by groups such as Patria y Libertad, a far-right paramilitary group that operated in the early 1970s in opposition to the leftist Unidad Popular (UP) government of President Salvador Allende (1970-1973). Allende, a Marxist, died during the 1973 military uprising that deposed his government and paved the way for Pinochet’s 17-year regime.

"[Authorities] ought to consider the hypothesis that groups or cells made up of former dictatorship agents have reactivated," said Jaime Quintana, president of the Partido por la Democracia (PPD), one of several political parties in Bachelet’s broad Nueva Mayoría coalition.

Chile’s Ambassador to Uruguay Eduardo Contreras made similar remarks earlier this month in a supposedly off-the-record conversation that later made its way into the Uruguayan newspaper La Diaria. Referring to the two metro-station attacks, Contreras, elected to Congress in 1973 but forced to flee Chile after the coup, said he has "no doubt at all that these recent terrorist acts are coming from the ultraright wing." He also accused the centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), the Nueva Mayoría’s most conservative party member, of actively supporting the coup.

The controversial comments quickly landed Contreras, a human rights lawyer and member of the far-left Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh), in hot water. The ambassador formally apologized on Oct. 18 after being ordered back to Santiago to officially explain himself. President Bachelet is allowing Contreras to retain his post despite calls from the right and from PDC leaders that he resign.

**Bad news for Bachelet**

The mysterious bombers, regardless of their political affiliation, represent a formidable challenge for the Bachelet administration, whose reform agenda has had to take a backseat amid calls from
the conservative opposition, national media, and regular citizens that it solve the public-security conundrum.

Bachelet, who first came to office in 2006 after serving as defense minister under her predecessor, President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), returned to power in March promising major structural reforms to address the country’s gaping inequality index (NotiSur, Dec. 20, 2013). She has already revamped the tax code and promises to use the additional resources the reform will provide (estimated at more than US$8 billion annually) to overhaul the education system as well (NotiSur, Aug. 8, 2014).

In recent months, however, Bachelet has seen her early momentum wane, in part because of intracoalition-cohesion problems. The uneasy security climate—and the opportunity it affords the conservative opposition to paint the left-leaning leader as soft on crime—has slowed the administration even more. Poll numbers released earlier this month by Adimark show an 11 percentage point drop in Bachelet’s approval rating, down from 58% in June to 47% in September, when the survey was conducted.

"Until as recently as two weeks ago, we were all talking about the education reform," analyst Cristóbal Bellolio of the Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez explained in a September interview with the German broadcaster Deutsche Welle. "The main subjects now are the economic slowdown, public insecurity, and the fact that the political scenario is more favorable for the right."

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