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Chile Slammed but Not Leveled by Third Major Earthquake in Five Years

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As cleanup efforts continue following last month’s major earthquake off the coast of Illapel, in the Coquimbo Region of northcentral Chile, more than a few observers are marveling at how relatively well the country fared—all things considered.

The disaster that unfolded on the evening of Sept. 16, just ahead of Chile’s annual Fiestas Patrias (Independence Day) celebrations, was both horrifying and tragic. The powerful quake ruined thousands of dwellings, prompted a mass evacuation along the country’s lengthy coastline—parts of which were inundated by tsunami waves—and killed 15, according to the Ministerio del Interior y Seguridad Pública’s Oficina Nacional de Emergencia (ONEMI). It also triggered a barrage of aftershocks (more than 800 to date), rattling already frayed nerves not only in Norte Chico, as the hardest-hit area is known, but in the populous Metropolitan (Santiago) and Valparaíso Regions, as well.

And yet, given the magnitude of the event—between 8.3 and 8.4 on the Richter scale—there is a widespread impression that the damage and death toll was mercifully modest. The Illapel quake was the strongest in the world so far this year and the fourth-most-powerful in Chile’s recorded history. The loss of life was minimal, nevertheless, compared, for example, to the magnitude 7.8 quake that hit Nepal in April and killed some 9,000 people, or the magnitude 7.0 event that killed more than 160,000 in Haiti in January 2010.

The Nepal and Haiti quakes, though weaker, were shallower and thus more violent in some respects. Another key reason the Illapel earthquake, for all its force, had a less disastrous effect on nearby towns and cities are the strict building codes Chile put into place following a 1985 quake (magnitude 8.0) in the Valparaíso Region that killed 177 people. Those regulations were also put to the test—and performed remarkably well—in April 2014, when a magnitude 8.2 quake struck near the northern city of Iquique, killing fewer than 10 people, and in February 2010, when a massive magnitude 8.8 quake, one of the strongest in world history, rocked central Chile and took more than 500 lives (NotiSur, March 12, 2010).

"We were lucky that the tsunami wasn’t that strong," architect and Universidad Católica professor Iván Poduje, commenting on the Illapel quake, told the Spanish daily El País. "But beyond that, the damage that this earthquake generated was marginal compared with what it would have been in a country that isn’t prepared. It was notable how well the buildings resisted."

Learning from the past

Chile has good reason to require—and enforce—demanding construction standards. One of the world’s most seismically active countries, it was also the site, in 1960, of the largest earthquake in recorded history, a magnitude 9.5 event near the southern city of Valdivia. Even by Chilean standards, however, the recent quake cluster—three magnitude 8.0 or larger events in five years—is unusual and more than a little bit unsettling.
At the same time, the quick succession of major earthquakes has given both citizens and authorities a chance to fine-tune their reaction protocols and learn from past mistakes. After the 2010 quake, the government underestimated the tsunami risk and failed to issue proper warnings, an error that had fatal consequences and led to ongoing criminal proceedings against several state officials. The right used the issue for several years to score political points against President Michelle Bachelet, who was just days away from completing her first term (2006-2010) when the earthquake struck. The 2014 Iquique earthquake took place just days after the center-left leader returned to power.

This time around, authorities took no chances, issuing a nation-length tsunami alert within minutes of the earthquake. Residents, also perhaps because of lessons learned from 2010, responded en masse: an estimated 1 million people raced from coastal areas to higher ground. The quick reactions, by both the government and citizens, likely saved lives given that, in the city of Coquimbo (population 150,000) and other coastal communities, tsunami waves did come ashore, albeit without the height and force of the 2010 disaster.

"[Chile went through] a magnitude 8.4 earthquake with minimal damage. [The effects were] tragic, but minimal," Antonio Molpeceres, Chile’s resident representative for the UN Development Programme (UNDP), told reporters. "Comparing things with other countries, it’s a credit to the Chilean people, their reaction, and the state’s role in investing resources to ensure that the country is prepared to face these natural disasters."

**Questionable comparisons**

Others, however, warn that Chile should be careful about drawing too many happy conclusions from the results of this versus past earthquakes, especially the 2010 event, which was significantly more powerful. In an essay published by the online news site El Mostrador, Universidad de Chile geology professor Gabriel Vargas Easton argued that the two earthquakes are simply "not comparable." The 2010 quake unleashed four times as much energy and affected a wider and more-populous section of the country, he pointed out. It also produced tsunami waves measuring 15 meters high. Tsunami waves from last month’s quake, in contrast, measured between 4 and 5 meters high.

"Earthquakes like the one in 2010 occur once every couple of centuries," Vargas Easton wrote. "The last one like it was probably the Concepción quake of 1834, the effects of which were recorded by [Charles] Darwin and [Vice-Admiral Robert] FitzRoy. The last earthquake equivalent to the Illapel event was the Ovalle quake of 1943, magnitude 8.2."

Another key difference between the 2010 and Illapel quakes were the times they struck—at 3:34 a.m. (local time) and 7:54 p.m., respectively—and the effects they had on electricity and mobile telephone networks. The 2010 earthquake left people very much in the dark, literally and figuratively, making coordination and communication extremely difficult, especially given that cell phone services, because of the overwhelming volume of traffic, were also very much hampered. Electricity problems were more localized this time around, and cell phone services were not nearly as affected.

"Many people were able to talk on their cell phones, via WhatsApp, or on video-chat," journalist Federico Grünewald wrote for the Argentine daily La Nación. "The social networks helped reduce uncertainty among the people. In less than 10 minutes, everyone knew where the quake had hit and what measures to take. They also had electricity."
"Realism without yielding"

President Bachelet made a pair of quick visits to the disaster zone and later promised one-time bonos (money vouchers) of approximately US$1,420 for families that "lost practically everything," US$710 for families that lost equipment or whose homes suffered some damage, and US$285 for families willing to provide shelter (for up to three months) to people left homeless by the disaster.

"We know that no measure can compensate for the losses suffered during this new natural catastrophe," she announced. "But we want people to know that we’re not going to abandon them. We’re going to provide the help needed so that people’s lives can return to normality."

The government has yet to put an estimate on the total cleanup and reconstruction costs but says it has the resources to cover the job. The timing of the disaster, nevertheless, is less than ideal for Chile, which finds itself in the midst of an economic slowdown that saw GDP growth drop from 5.5% in 2012 to 4.2% in 2013 and just 1.9% last year, according to the World Bank. Chile’s Banco Central expects growth this year to be in the 2% to 2.5% range.

The slowdonw is in large part the result of falling copper prices, Chile’s top export and a key source of revenue for the state, which depends heavily on income it earns via the Corporación Nacional del Cobre de Chile (CODELCO), the largest copper-producing company in the world. As of Sept. 29, copper prices were near a six-and-a-half-year low, the BBC reported. They are down approximately 20% this year alone.

The economic downturn is taking a toll on Bachelet’s approval rating—which has fallen to 20%, according to one recent poll (NotiSur, Sept. 25, 2015)—and prompted her to backtrack somewhat regarding her ambitious reform agenda. Recent news reports suggest, for example, that the government is already planning to earmark less than originally promised for the president’s plan, starting next year, to guarantee free university education for 60% of the country’s lowest-income students.

In July, Bachelet said her administration would embrace "realismo sin renuncia" (realism without yielding). "We know we’re not going to have all the revenue we’d originally expected to be able to advance our program and answer new social demands," she said (NotiSur, July 24, 2015). The president referred to the policy shift again during a Sept. 25 appearance in the US, where she told an audience gathered at the Americas Society/Council of the Americas in New York that "gradualness will characterize our next steps." And on Sept. 29, Bachelet announced that, for 2016, her government plans to increase public spending by just 4.4%, far less than this year’s 9.8% increase.

"We have fixed priorities and organized our commitments in line with our capabilities," the president said. "It is a responsible budget."

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