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More Property Destruction, Arrests in Chile’s Mapuche Heartland

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A spate of arson attacks and the roundup, in late March, of multiple suspects in a high-profile homicide case have turned new attention to long-standing antagonisms between ethnic Mapuches, the Chilean state, and non-indigenous landholders in the country’s south-central Araucanía, Biobío and Los Ríos regions.

Adding to the uncertainty is the emergence of a supposedly new player in the conflict: a resistance organization calling itself Weichán Auka Mapu, Mapudungun for “Fight of the Rebel Territory.” Mapudungun is the native language of the Mapuche, Chile’s largest indigenous group and the victim, in the late 1800s, of a so-called “pacification” campaign that cost the tribe most of its ancestral lands in and around the Araucanía, some 600 kilometers south of Santiago.

Weichán Auka Mapu introduced itself to the public on April 21, claiming in a press communiqué that it is responsible for nearly 40 property attacks committed over the past three years. “In terms of resistance, we incorporate an armed element as an obligatory response to the systemic violence that the Chilean state has exercised against the Mapuche people,” the statement read.

Targets of the arson attacks, or “acts of sabotage,” as the group described them, include homes and summer cabins, as well as vehicles, farm equipment and other heavy machinery. In some cases the property belongs to large forestry companies that operate in the Araucanía and adjacent Biobío and Los Ríos regions. The group also took credit for a rash of recent church burnings, claiming five such attacks in the previous month. “The Catholic Church played a key role in the permanent occupation of our territory,” Weichán Auka Mapu argued in its communiqué.

Early on the morning of April 26—less than a week after the group went public—another church was torched, this time in the municipality of Padre Las Casas, in the Araucanía. Investigators told reporters they found Weichán Auka Mapu pamphlets at the scene of the crime. Local media also reported an arson attack, on April 18, at a Catholic university in Cañete, in the Biobío region.

Pre-dawn raids

The church burnings and the Weichán Auka Mapu pronouncement bring a new sense of urgency to the so-called “Mapuche conflict,” which has smoldered for years and is characterized by occasional property attacks on the one hand, and heavy police and judicial repression on the other. “We won’t be cowed,” Interior Minister Jorge Burgos told reporters in response to the April 26 church burning. “This is an act of extreme brutality, because not only are these churches places of worship, they also serve as social gathering points for some of the most marginalized communities.”

In a few isolated cases, clashes between police and Mapuche residents have had fatal consequences. In August 2009, during an operation to evict Mapuches from a seized Araucanía farm, police shot and killed a 24-year-old Mapuche man named Jaime Facundo Mendoza Collío (NotiSur, Nov. 13, 2009). Another young Mapuche, Matías Catrileo, was killed the year before. In 2012, for the first
time, the conflict took the life of a police officer, Hugo Albornoz (NotiSur, Aug. 3, 2012). A second policeman, Álex Gutiérrez Vásquez, was killed in 2014.

The conflict also took the lives, in early 2013, of a non-indigenous landowning couple—Werner Luchsinger, 75, and Vivianne Mackay, 69—who died when a group of assailants, presumably Mapuches, set fire to their home on the anniversary of Catrileo’s death, five years earlier, in the same community (NotiSur, March 28, 2014).

The three-year-old Luchsinger/Mackay case continues to make headlines, most recently on March 30, when authorities carried out a series of early-morning raids, arresting 11 Mapuches presumed to have planned and/or taken part in the deadly arson attack. Ten of the suspects are being held pending further investigation. Among the accused is a woman named Francisca Linconao Huircapán, a machi (traditional healer) who had already been arrested once for her alleged role in the crime but was later released. Linconao Huircapán sued the state for moral damages, eventually winning a settlement (in October 2015) for roughly US$45,000.

The state is charging the Mapuches with “deadly arson of a terrorist nature.” Lawyers for the accused say their clients are innocent and argue that the state’s handling of the matter is rife with irregularities. The case is based, they say, on a coerced “confession” given in October by one of the alleged culprits, José Manuel Peralino, who later retracted his claims. Peralino is the only member of the 11-person group not being held in pretrial detention.

“[Peralino] personally told the court today that everything he had said was false, and that he had been pressured by the Policía de Investigaciones (Chile’s national detective force), including today, to offer a new declaration and reaffirm his statements from October,” defense attorney Pablo Ardouín told CNN Chile after an initial hearing on March 31. “This is not the first time that people who are later absolved of any wrongdoing are forced to spend time—a long time—in prison,” he added.

‘Clumsy approach’

The only person convicted so far in connection with the Luchsinger/Mackay case is Celestino Córdova, a young Mapuche who was arrested near the site of the deadly fire and sentenced, 14 months later, to 18 years in prison. Prosecutors had hoped to secure an even stiffer punishment and were disappointed by the court’s decision, in the end, to find Córdova guilty of a standard crime (arson causing death) rather than terrorism.

The disappointment was shared by family members of the victims and by the administration of outgoing President Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014), who left office less than two weeks after Córdova’s sentence was handed down. “[Córdova] wasn’t just looking to commit a robbery,” the conservative leader said. “He was looking to produce terror, produce terror in the population, or at least in part of the population.”

Piñera’s more moderate successor, President Michelle Bachelet, assumed a decidedly different posture upon returning to office in March 2014. Promising “a new deal with our original peoples,” she also chose Francisco Huenchumilla, a man of Mapuche descent, to serve as intendente (appointed regional governor) of the Araucanía, the historic heartland of Chile’s Mapuche population. Bachelet, head of center-left coalition called the Nueva Mayoría, is in her second, non-consecutive term as president. She first led the country from 2006 until 2010.
Huenchumilla, a veteran of the centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), made his presence felt immediately, apologizing for the “dispossession” of the Mapuche’s ancestral lands and acknowledging a “pending debt” toward the indigenous group. “For more than 130 years, public policies have been implemented that have failed to pull this region out of poverty,” he said on March 12, 2014, just one day after Bachelet took office. “In the name of President Michelle Bachelet, I pledge the political will to do something different, not just more of the same.”

Less than 18 months later, however, Huenchumilla was sacked as intendente. Whatever good will his timely mea culpa may have inspired among Mapuches in the Araucanía and neighboring regions appears to have gone with him. Mapuche groups see Huenchumilla’s replacement, Andrés Jouannet, as being openly partial to the area’s landowners and forestry companies. They also fault Bachelet for reneging on her campaign promise not to use the country’s controversial anti-terrorism law, a relic of the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990), to prosecute Mapuche activists.

“As far as the Mapuche are concerned, I don’t see the difference between the Nueva Mayoría and the political right,” Huenchumilla said in a December interview with the satirical news magazine The Clinic. “I think the Piñera administration, when you compare it to the clumsy approach we’re seeing right now, was more elegant. Here, there’s no imagination. All they can come up with is to buy more armored vehicles, to have the police carry out more repression. It’s clumsy. It’s a huge mistake.”

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