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## Chilean Advisory Group Wants President to Apologize for Mapuche Conflict

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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With the clock ticking down on her second and presumably final term as president, Michelle Bachelet is expected to make a last-ditch effort to calm the so-called Mapuche conflict, a deeply complex social and political problem that has hounded the center-left leader since she first came to power more than a decade ago. Bachelet served as president from 2006 to 2010 before returning to office in 2014.

The policy push, which the Bachelet administration promises to outline in the coming weeks, follows a recent uptick of violence in the central Araucanía region, home to a large percentage of Chile's ethnic Mapuches. The Mapuches are the country'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 the Araucanía area ([NotiSur, May 13, 2016](#)).

Bachelet's plan is likely to draw heavily on proposals presented earlier this year by the Comisión Asesora Presidencial de La Araucanía, a special advisory group formed last July and headed by Bishop Héctor Vargas, a Catholic Church leader in Temuco, the region's capital. The 20-person committee submitted its findings on Jan. 23, recommending among other things that Bachelet apologize on behalf of the Chilean state "for the consequences this conflict has had for the Mapuche people and any other victims of the violence in the region."

The "other victims" include non-indigenous people who have lost property and even—in a few isolated cases—their lives as a result of arson attacks allegedly perpetrated by Mapuches. The conflict's most recent fatality took place Jan. 15, when unidentified assailants torched a house in the Araucanía community of Cañete. The caretaker of the property, José Retamal, died of smoke inhalation.

The killing occurred almost exactly three years after another arson attack took the lives of Werner Luchsinger and Vivianne Mackay, an elderly landowning couple in Vilcún, also in the Araucanía ([NotiSur, March 28, 2014](#)). Two police officers, one in 2012 and another in 2014, have also died in relation to the conflict.

### *Violence and repression*

Business leaders and conservative politicians describe the situation as out of control and say a strict law-and-order approach is needed to guarantee basic protections. On Jan. 11, the Sociedad de Fomento Fabril (SOFOFA), an influential association of manufacturing companies, called on the Bachelet administration to take "immediate and exceptional actions" to identify and prosecute the authors of the arson attacks. "[The region] is no longer governed by the rule of law," the association warned. "The incapacity of the powers of government to respond and fulfill their functions of law enforcement and punishment of crimes is evident."

A week later, former President Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014), a leading opposition voice and an early favorite to win the presidential election in November, delivered a similar message during a

surprise visit to Cañete, where Retamal had died three days earlier. "I'm convinced this was an act of terrorism," he said of the deadly arson attack. "The next government is going to have to radically change its way of handling terrorism, and this means a new attitude, a new willingness."

But as many Mapuches and their sympathizers point out, the state already takes a heavy-handed approach to the conflict, with near-constant police presence in certain Araucanía hot-spots, brutal raids on Mapuche homes, frequent arrests, and the application, against certain Mapuche suspects, of an anti-terrorism law that dates back to the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990). The much-maligned anti-terror law allows for extended pretrial detention, the use of anonymous witnesses, and other mechanisms designed to benefit prosecutors ([NotiSur, Sept. 10, 2010](#)).

In a recent telephone interview with the Inter Press Service (IPS) news agency, Carlos Bresciani, a Jesuit priest who lives in the conflict zone, challenged SOFOFA's "rule of law" claim as a gross exaggeration. What's really missing in the area, he said, is respect for the human rights of Mapuche residents. "That is a serious thing. It is the government that undermines their rights. Talking of an absence of the rule of law is just an excuse to put the military in the territory," Bresciani said.

In a handful of cases, actions by Chile's carabineros (uniformed police) have had fatal consequences. In early 2008, during Bachelet's first term as president, a police officer shot and killed a young Mapuche activist named Matías Catrileo. Another young indigenous man, Jaime Mendoza Collío, was killed the next year, also by a carabinero ([NotiSur, Nov. 13, 2009](#)).

There have been recent cases of Mapuches being seriously injured by police. In the Biobío region, directly north of the Araucanía, carabineros shot two Mapuche men in a "confusing incident" early on the morning of Dec. 26, Radio Cooperativa reported. The episode took place just as President Bachelet was visiting the area to meet with members of the Comisión Asesora Presidencial. A week earlier, a Mapuche teenager in Collipulli, in the Araucanía, was shot in the back by police after being stopped for an identification check.

Rather than forcing indigenous communities into law-abiding submission, as groups like SOFOFA hope, the military-style police repression has only radicalized the struggle by some Mapuches for land restitution and political autonomy, making the long-festering conflict that much harder to resolve. "We're a subjugated people," Héctor Llaitul, leader of the militant Mapuche group Coordinadora Arauco Malleco (CAM), said in a late January interview with the news site Diario Uchile. "How is this different from the militarily criminal 'pacification of the Araucanía' that the Chilean state imposed on us in the late 19th century? The same regime of colonial occupation and forced integration and Chilenization persists today."

### *'Wounded and fragmented region'*

The recommendations put forth by the Comisión Asesora Presidencial come as an attempt to tame the tensions between Mapuches, non-indigenous landowners, and the state, and chart a course by which the various parties can move toward a more peaceful coexistence. Their proposal that Bachelet publicly apologize to all victims of the conflict represents, in that sense, an all-important launching point for the process.

"The Mapuche people have suffered the most, perhaps, of anyone in this story. But there are victims from all sectors. That's something that needs to be kept in mind," Richard Caifal, a Mapuche lawyer who participated in the advisory group, told Diario Uchile.

The committee also recommends the creation of a national registry to identify and eventually compensate people who have directly suffered as a result of the conflict in the last 25 years. Other proposals include mechanisms to increase Mapuche representation in Congress, facilitate land transfers to Mapuche claimants, and boost public spending in the Araucanía, one of Chile's most impoverished regions. The poverty rate, as measured by income, is 23.6%, double the national average of 11.7%, according to the government's most recent national survey.

The Araucanía is a "wounded and fragmented region" that is facing a "gradual intensification of its problems," Bishop Vargas, the committee leader, told reporters upon presenting the group's final report. "[These problems] involve a historical debt to the Mapuche people, the dramatic situation of the victims of rural violence, and the very worrying indicators that rank us as the poorest region in the country."

It's not yet clear which of the advisory group's dozens of recommendations Bachelet will try to pursue. What is certain is that the president will face an uphill battle trying to sell her policy goals to the various parties involved, and to Congress, where she'll need support to approve items related, for example, to funding or increased parliamentary participation by Mapuches. Even in the best of times, the Mapuche conflict is deeply divisive and difficult to maneuver. With elections coming up and Bachelet's exit from power on the horizon (she leaves office in March 2018), this is hardly an ideal moment to negotiate new legislation.

The political right has already come out against some of the commission's recommendations, dismissing, for example, the idea of expanding Mapuche representation in Congress.

"It's too easy to think that the problem of the Araucanía can be resolved with a few congressional seats. It may satisfy the needs of a few people who want to be lawmakers, but that's it," Sen. Jacqueline van Rysselberghe, head of the hard-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) party, told reporters in January. The UDI is one of the two principal parties in the conservative Chile Vamos coalition.

Leading Mapuche voices are also critical of the recommendations, calling them "more of the same" and warning that unless the state is willing to withdraw its repressive police presence in the Araucanía and adjacent regions, the conflict will continue. Even Caifal, who helped draft the proposals, expressed dismay with the group's final report. In his interview with *Diario Uchile*, the attorney defended the committee's efforts as "serious" and well intentioned. But he lamented that for reasons not entirely clear, the final draft failed to include a central demand of the Mapuche people: that Chile be defined constitutionally as a "plurinational" state.

"This is the most important point in the discussion of the document. The rest is secondary," Caifal said. "Everything that has to do with modifying laws or budget items is subordinate to what the Constitution establishes. That's what worries me. That's why I'm so frustrated with what occurred."

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