

US Newsstream

A beacon of stability, now in turmoil

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Thousands of Chileans returned to the streets of Santiago on Monday, banging pots and honking car horns to launch a second week of protests against cost-of-living pressures and income inequality.

At least 11 people are dead, 200 injured and more than 1,500 detained as the nation of 18 million, long a beacon of stability and prosperity in South America, has become the latest Latin American country to erupt in violence.

Protesters called a general strike Monday; President Sebastián Piñera said the country was at war. A state of emergency continued, and authorities declared more curfews. But after a bloody weekend, some public services resumed operations, and some businesses reopened.

U.N. rights chief Michelle Bachelet called Monday for dialogue, independent investigations and an end to "inflammatory rhetoric."

"I'm deeply disturbed and saddened to see violence, destruction, deaths & injuries in #Chile," tweeted Bachelet, Piñera's predecessor as president of the Andean nation. "I urge the Govt to work with all sectors to find solutions to address grievances and bring calm. I urge all planning to take part in protests to do so peacefully."

The youth-led demonstrations, sparked last week by an increase in subway fares in the capital, have grown and spread even after Piñera rescinded the fare boost. Protesters have shut down public transportation, ransacked supermarkets and pharmacies, and set fire to subway stations and government buildings.

Piñera has responded by deploying more than 10,000 troops in the largest operation since the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet more than three decades ago. Security forces have fired tear gas and rubber bullets at the crowds.

Three civilians died Sunday night, authorities said. One was shot; two died in a fire at a supermarket. Fifty security personnel were seriously injured.

"We are at war against a powerful enemy, willing to use violence with no limits," Piñera said Sunday.

But by Monday morning, the leader of the armed forces sought to walk back that claim.

"I am at war with nobody," Gen. Javier Iturriaga told reporters.

The chaos follows protests against austerity and corruption in Haiti, Ecuador, Peru, Argentina and Honduras, among other countries. But Chile was supposed to be different. The country tops South America across virtually all tables: per capita GDP, the U.N. Human Development Index, multiple freedom rankings.

"Everyone following Latin America is watching this and saying, 'Oh my God, Chile, too?' " said Brian Winter, vice president for policy at the Americas Society/Council of the Americas.

Why are Chileans protesting?

The 4 percent increase in subway fares sparked small demonstrations a week ago. By the end of last week, the movement had mushroomed into massive demonstrations against a rising cost of living and an economic model that angry Chileans say delivers growth unequally.

"For more than a decade now, studies have warned of the increasing frustration with living conditions in Chile, said Jorge Contesse, a law professor at Rutgers University. "Yet we keep being told that this was unforeseeable."

Many feel trapped by the combination of increasing costs and an economic slowdown.

"The anger that keeps people in the streets is against a model that privatizes and profits from all the aspects of our life," tweeted Emilia Schneider, head of the Federation of Students of the University of Chile. "The rise of the tickets was the drop that spilled the glass."

Who's protesting?

It started with university students, who stormed subway stations last week without paying, chanted slogans and spray-painted walls. The protests continue to be dominated by students, but Chileans of all ages, workers and professionals, have joined.

Patricio Navia, a Chilean political scientist at New York University, noted the alienation of the middle class.

"Piñera's government has always been preoccupied with reducing poverty, and has also designed policies that help the rich, so the middle class feels abandoned," he said.

How has the government responded?

Piñera declared a state of emergency in six cities Saturday. Security forces have fired tear gas and rubber bullets at protesters.

Piñera said Saturday that the subway price increase would be reversed and called for dialogue. Student leaders and opposition politicians rejected that call until the state of emergency was canceled and soldiers returned to their barracks.

Piñera said those causing violence "have a level of logistics that is characteristic of a criminal organization."

Why is Latin America erupting in unrest?

As in Chile, protesters in Ecuador and Argentina succeeded in forcing leaders to make concessions, which analysts say will likely encourage more protests. Growing access to social media has also helped galvanize movements.

Trust in the political system, meanwhile, has reached a nadir. Pollster Latinobarómetro has found that less than 25 percent of the region's population is "satisfied with democracy in their country."

"As the economy has slowed over the last decade everywhere in the region, people are not seeing their lives improve as much as they expected and are lashing out against their governments, and the whole system," Winter said.

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