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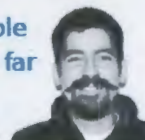
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Six Weeks Post Quake, Chile's Housing Crisis Continues

WRITTEN BY AARON CANTU

FRIDAY, 09 APRIL 2010 04:14

Hundreds of thousands still homeless; winter comes on

It's been 40 days since the earth ripped and rocked under Chileans' feet, and as winter approaches, the country is looking at the progress of its relief efforts.

Depending on who you ask, you will get one of two assessments: it has been either a steady and meticulous effort to rebuild the nation, or a slow and bureaucratic mess of good intentions that won't house all of the displaced before the rains start to fall.

The most obvious places to use as benchmarks of progress would be Chile's most damaged regions, specifically, those between Region V (Valparaíso) and Biobío in the South.

The government and Un Techo Para Chile, a Chilean non-governmental organization (NGO) that provides basic housing for the homeless, have trumpeted their having built together more than 7000 temporary housing units in these regions.

But that figure is only 17.8% of the 40,000 such units that are supposed to be built by June 11.

In Lebu and Talca in the Biobío and Maule regions, respectively, the majority of displaced people still live in tents, and some have been voicing discontent with the few basic wooden housing units now in place.

"The houses are precarious and move with the aftershocks," said Carlos González, mayor of Lebu. "The roofs will not keep out the rain."



Bobby Palmer, a volunteer with Levantamos a Los Coipos, stands at the altar of a ruined church. Courtesy of Mohan Sakhrani

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In Dichato and Concepción, both in Biobío, the situation is even more dire—neither the government nor Un Techo Para Chile has started to erect temporary houses in either city, though the Biobío regional government claims 100 will be built in Dichato by today, Friday.

Patricio Domínguez, the general director of Techo Para Chile, dismissed criticisms of tardiness and haphazard construction. "The homes are perfectly ready to house families," he said.

Smaller but no less desperate

Hidden between the larger metropolitan regions that receive most of the press are many small towns and villages scattered throughout the central and southern regions. Slower governmental and organizational assistance renders them much more vulnerable to prolonged suffering and threatens to exacerbate the social and economic gaps between Chile's rural and urban populations.

One such place is the municipality of Hualafie in the Maule Region, where more than 1,000 dwellings were destroyed. The total number of buildings in need of reparations remains unknown. Even were it known, help couldn't come quickly: there is only one excavator in the entire town.

Los Coipos, a village within Hualafie where the majority of homes have been deemed inhabitable, has been fortunate to become the focus of a private relief effort called Levantamos a Los Coipos, begun by three Santiago university students.

"So far, we've been to the area three times," said Mohan Sakhrani, a member of the project. "We've taken supplies, helped build temporary homes and provided emotional support for the community." He said that some students working with him have already planned their own projects for neighboring villages.

The founders of Levantamos a Los Coipos had familial ties to the village; for places without such connections, assistance will undoubtedly come slower.

Trouble in Paradise

Although officials have hailed Santiago's weathering the quake as a testament to effective regulation and expert planning, the city was far from unscathed.

"In Santiago, structural damage has been found in many modern buildings, scattered over several comunas, mostly Recoleta, Independencia, Santiago, Maipú and Ñuñoa," said Sebastián Grey, professor of architecture at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. "Most of these appear to be mid- and high-rise middle-class housing complexes."

Grey blames shoddy building practices for the damage. "In my opinion, the most plausible explanation is a relaxation in building procedures, including too hasty construction," he said. He added that "structural design and the quality of materials are not in question."

One man living in the comuna of Maipú, Pablo Guterrez, has been out of a home because his apartment suffered so much damage that he and his family had to move in with relatives.

"Some people with nowhere else to go stayed in the building, but most left," he said.

Guterrez said he knows of others who also left badly damaged Santiago apartments. What amazes him, as it does architect Grey, is that most of the damaged buildings were new. "Some were less than three years old," Guterrez said.

"There seems to be no effort to construct temporary housing in Santiago," he said, later speculating, "I don't know if it's because most people are middle class or because Santiago wasn't designated a catastrophe zone, but it's just not offered here."

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Unfinished business

The truly daunting task in Chile's South will be the long-term effort needed to reconstruct homes that were destroyed by the earthquake.

Such construction is contracted out to third-party companies, and a frustrating amalgamation of bureaucracy and legal issues can slow progress enough to create a disconcerting rift between official promises and hard reality.

One need only look at Tocopilla in the Antofagasta Region (ST, [March 15, 2010](#)) where an earthquake in November 2007 left 3,800 families homeless. Former President Michelle Bachelet promised in its aftermath that all of the displaced would be living in homes again by March 2010, but as of today, more than 40% are still living in temporary housing.

The pace of reconstruction in Tocopilla only hints at the problems to come in the South, where the scale of damage and number of affected people is staggeringly larger. Some pieces of land are ruined to the extent that developers cannot build homes on them. Who will pay for new land? Who will be willing to insure homes built where such devastation may happen again?

The truth is that official rhetoric cannot possibly answer all the problems on the ground, and whether any of the promised deadlines announced will be met is as much a mystery as when the next aftershock will be.

SOURCES: LA TERCERA, EL SUR

By Aaron Cantu (editor@santiagotimes.cl)

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1 Friday, 09 April 2010 06:36

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