
Americas view
The Americas

Indigenous rights in Chile
Unhappy new year

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JANUARY is often a fraught month in the Araucanía, the lush, green region of southern Chile which for centuries has been home to the Mapuches, the country's largest indigenous minority. In the first month of 2008 a young Mapuche man, Matías Catrileo, was shot dead by police while trespassing on private land he claimed had historically belonged to his

ancestors. He has become something of a martyr for indigenous rights activists. Four years later, seven firefighters died while trying to extinguish a forest fire. The government said the blaze was started deliberately, possibly by the Coordinadora Arauco-Malleco, a radical group dedicated to taking back what they regard as traditional Mapuche lands.

This New Year has proved just as difficult. In the early hours of January 4th, a group of around 20 masked attackers surrounded the rural home of Werner Luchsinger, a well-known landowner and farmer, and set it alight. Mr Luchsinger, 74, and his wife were burned alive. It is highly likely that he was targeted for revenge. It was on Mr Luchsinger's land that Catrileo was killed, and the Luchsingers, whose ancestors moved to the region from Switzerland in the 19th century, have a long history of troubled relations with their Mapuche neighbours.

Sebastián Piñera, the president, responded to the latest outbreak of violence by clearing his diary to visit the Araucanía. He said his government would set up an anti-terrorism unit in the region and draft more police officers. Such incremental measures might help a bit. But



they are unlikely to bring an end to the conflict, which dates from the late 19th century, when the Chilean state finally tamed the Araucanía—something Spanish colonists had failed to do in over 200 years—rounded up the Mapuches, and sold off their land to mostly European settlers.

Successive Chilean governments have failed to devise a comprehensive policy to resolve the Araucanía's problems. Over the past decade, they have focused on land redistribution. The state has bought land from forestry companies and farmers and returned it to Mapuche families.

But the process is fraught with obstacles. The Mapuches often cannot prove the land in question once belonged to their ancestors. The programme has been only partially successful. Critics of the policy say it has tended to reward the most strident Mapuches, particularly those who advocate violence, at the expense of others with equally valid claims. At times land has been granted to groups who lack the wherewithal to farm it productively.

Frustrated by what they perceive as a lack of progress, Mapuche activists have resorted to impromptu land seizures. They often stray onto disputed farmland and occupy it for hours, sometimes days, until the police drive them off. Some of these protests end peacefully, but others, like the one that claimed Catrileo's life, turn violent.

Meanwhile, the conflict has intensified of late. Libertad y Desarrollo, a think tank, estimates there were 177 violent incidents related to indigenous-rights claims in the Araucanía in 2012. That makes last year one of the most violent in the region in over a decade. The local economy is feeling the consequences. According to a recent study, the Araucanía is the poorest of Chile's 15 regions, with an income per head of little over \$5,000, less than a third of the national average. The poverty rate there is 23%, well above the national average of 14%. Foreign investment has largely dried up.

The region's problems seem all but intractable, and Mr Piñera, a conservative with a business background, has been neither more nor less successful in tackling it than his centre-left predecessors. Some Mapuches have called for political autonomy, citing the example of Spain's regions. But unlike the Basques or Catalans, the Mapuches are a minority even within their own region. The majority of Araucanians regard themselves as Chilean.

Violence in the Araucanía has a tendency to dissipate just as suddenly as it flares, and the region may well return to relative calm within a few weeks. But the underlying conflict between the Chilean state and the country's original inhabitants will rumble on for far

longer.

Editor's note: Because of a technical error, a different version of this blog post was posted on January 10th.