

Chilean President defends handling of quake

Ginger Thompson and Marc Lacey

As aid began to trickle out to the southern areas of Chile pounded by last weekend's earthquake, President Michelle Bachelet struggled to respond to a growing torrent of criticism here that her government has responded with too little, too late.

On Wednesday morning, President Bachelet, in her last few days in office, visited a Catholic housing agency that hopes to raise enough money to build at least 30,000 temporary houses. She also met with leaders of Chile's most powerful business association to discuss how the government could help them recover losses, and how they could help the country.

Then in the afternoon, in an extensive interview on Chile's most popular radio station, the typically poised and restrained president made it clear that she resented the accusations against her government. "Everyone claims to be a general after the war," she said.

Public criticism has been building that the military's emergency alert system failed to adequately warn the country that a tsunami might strike, and that the government has been slow to marshal its resources or ask for international help in the aftermath of the disaster.

The nation's largest newspaper, *El Mercurio*, reported Wednesday that military officials initially said the earthquake had happened so far inland that there would not be a tsunami. But in some towns, the surge of water appeared to do even more damage than the earthquake itself.

President Bachelet said the accusations that her government had mishandled the earthquake and the relief effort were igniting public anxiety — which she described as a "collective psychosis" — that put the country at risk of instability.

"I understand people's pain and fear," she said, "but in this period of emergency, unfounded rumors only add to the unease and fear."

"There was no lack of will," she added. "No one failed to fulfill their responsibilities. There are things that could have been done differently. There are things that must be changed to prevent this from happening again."

"But now is not the time to assign blame," she said. "Now is the time to make sure we help those in crisis."

Ms. Bachelet's defense of the government comes as it begins to grapple with the enormous cost of rebuilding the country.

The death toll from the earthquake had risen to nearly 800 by Tuesday, Ms. Bachelet said during a visit to the shattered city of Curicó. Overall damage estimates ran as high as \$30 billion, Ms. Bachelet said earlier that day, with about 500,000 homes destroyed and serious damage done to bridges, roads, ports and public transportation stations.

Some of Chile's economic engines, like its forestry companies and its wineries, were also hard hit, economists said. But the country's important copper mines, which produce about a third of the world's mined copper, are mostly in the north and appear to have been largely spared.

When pressed for a monetary estimate of the damage at an appearance with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton at the Santiago airport on Tuesday, Ms. Bachelet, gave a heavy sigh and said, "All I can say is it's going to be a lot."

She added, "Chile has the capacity, but I think it's going to take a long time and it will mean a whole lot of money."

Mrs. Clinton, on a tour of Latin America, greeted Ms. Bachelet with an embrace and vowed to help Chileans with whatever they needed to get back on their feet. Delivering 25 satellite phones, one of which she handed to the Chilean president personally, Mrs. Clinton said that the United States was already preparing to send eight water purification units, temporary bridges, a field hospital and other medical supplies to the damage zone.

"We'll be here to help when others leave because we are committed to this partnership and this friendship with Chile," Mrs. Clinton said.

Access to the country began opening up Tuesday as the government announced that the damaged passenger terminal at the Santiago airport would be replaced with tents to allow more flights in and out.

Although a large aid effort was under way, tens of thousands of Chileans affected by the quake that struck early Saturday remain with little or no food, drinking water and shelter, and reports of looting and other lawlessness continued. In Concepción, one of the hardest-hit cities, thousands of government troops were sent in to restore order, extending an overnight curfew until midday.

Ms. Bachelet said that putting an end to the violence in affected areas was her most pressing concern, while her successor, Sebastián Piñera, called the wave of vandalism "unacceptable."

The potential for serious economic setbacks in a country considered one of this region's success stories has been a central concern among government officials. Mr. Piñera, the first conservative elected to office since the end of the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, said he had not abandoned his campaign promises to grow Chile's economy this year and create about 200,000 jobs.

But in some outlying areas, entire towns have been utterly destroyed or have "totally disappeared," according to World Vision, an aid organization. People are camping in the streets, in tents and in the hills, and "supplies are low nearly everywhere," the group said, but bringing in aid has been difficult because many roads are impassable.

In Constitución, a town on the Pacific coast that endured both the earthquake and the tsunami that followed, the bodies have begun to smell. The gym has been turned into a makeshift morgue, and residents gathered in the plaza on Tuesday in the hope that relief trucks would arrive.

"The best moments of my life, I've had there," said Karina Murga, 27, whose family fled Constitución to stay with her brother in Talca after their house was ruined. Her brother has electricity but still no water, so Ms. Murga has to use a fire hydrant. Many residents of Constitución say they will not return, Ms. Murga said, but she wants to go back.

"Part of my heart is there," she said, beginning to cry.

At the United Nations, Catherine Bragg, the deputy head of humanitarian relief, said that Chile was probably the best-prepared country in Latin America for such a disaster and as such required relatively little aid from the world body. Still, she said, "No matter how prepared you are, there are going to be repercussions from something as big as this."

Wine is a major segment of the Chilean economy, and the Maule Valley, Chile's oldest and most productive wine region, was struck hard. Viña Concha y Toro, the country's largest wine maker, said its wineries were significantly damaged, leading the company to stop production and sales for a week.

"There is much destruction," Mario Lobo, director of Los Vascos in the Colchagua Valley, north of the epicenter, said in an e-mail message. "We are looking after our people first to provide the neediest with shelter, water and food. There is still no electricity, water or any type of phone service."

Elsewhere in the countryside, the story was much the same: wine casks destroyed; huge vats cracked, their wine spilling out; ruined equipment; and structural damage that could threaten the coming vintage as well.

"It was a double whammy," said Michael Evans, founder of The Vines of Mendoza, a winery in Mendoza, Argentina, a region that felt the earthquake on the other side of the Andes. "This is all happening when the harvest is beginning, when the grapes are ready to be harvested."

In the central valley of Colchagua, a three-day party to mark the wine harvest was to begin next week. Not this year.

"This is no time to celebrate," said José Miguel Viu, the third-generation owner of the Viu Manent vineyard near the tourist town of Santa Cruz. Wine barrels were ruined, about 132,000 gallons have been lost and broken bottles littered the floor. The smell of wasted wine was everywhere.

In contrast, copper prices that rose after the quake began to fall on Tuesday when reports came in that damage was less than anticipated, Reuters reported. Chile's Codelco, the world's top copper miner with annual production of 210,000 tons, said that all operations at its major Andina copper mine would be back online soon.

For many Chileans, though, normality seemed a long way off. Daniela Agüero, 24, who works in Santiago, the capital, was still trying to reach her missing relatives in Concepción. "I am desperate, been waiting for days with no news," she said with tears in her eyes. "I fear the worst."

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