

Chile: A Tidal Wave of Solidarity

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CARACAS - Chile has been wrapped in a blanket of international solidarity, while offers of cooperation for the relief of victims and the reconstruction of the country shower down upon it, after the devastating Feb. 27 earthquake and tsunami.

Social networking sites like Twitter reflect this massive wave of solidarity, which has been joined by Hollywood stars like Canadian-American comedian Jim Carrey, Jessica Alba and Eva Longoria - both of Latin descent - and singers such as Juanes and Shakira, both from Colombia, Ricky Martin of Puerto Rico, Laura Pausini of Italy, Alejandro Sanz of Spain and Ricardo Arjona from Guatemala.

"My thoughts and prayers are with all my Chilean brothers and sisters. We can all lend a hand," said Shakira, while Sanz wrote: "Once again nature has struck human beings. Let's all be on the alert for whatever aid channels are opened up." Juanes, for his part, said early on the Saturday of the quake, "Today we are all Chileans," and he asked his fans to do everything they could to help the stricken country.

Former U.S. model Cindy Crawford said she was "very concerned about the disaster in Chile." Longoria asked for "prayers for our brothers and sisters in Chile," as did Oswaldo "Ozzie" Guillén, the Venezuelan manager of the Chicago White Sox baseball team. Instant messaging services are also buzzing with requests for help locating people: "I need news to reassure his father who lives in Argentina and has not heard from Raúl Dragonetti and his family, they live in (the hard-hit southern city of) Concepción, on the corner of Ararranza and Freire streets, opposite the Colegio Don Bosco. Thank you. Mario, Buenos Aires," was a typical message.

World leaders have also expressed their support, from Pope Benedict XVI, who in addition to his prayers called for "solidarity, especially from ecclesiastical organisations," to the communist government of North Korea, which sent a condolence message.

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva travelled to Santiago Monday to convey his solidarity and coordinate immediate relief from his country, Latin America's giant, based on a list of priorities drawn up by outgoing Chilean President Michelle Bachelet. "Chile did not deserve a catastrophe like this," Lula said.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton arrived Tuesday on a similar mission. Her's was one of a series of brief high-level visits to Chile that included Peruvian President Alan García and Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca. The diplomatic frictions that exist between Chile and the two countries of Bolivia and Peru makes these visits even more significant.

Right after the quake, Bachelet expressed gratitude for the wave of offers of help, but said that no immediate aid was needed. However, by Monday she had a detailed list of urgently needed items, among which the top priority is field hospitals.

She said a great many resources as well as long-term assistance would be required to support the reconstruction of at least 1.5 million housing units damaged in the earthquake, which had a magnitude of 8.8 on the Richter scale, and was followed by a tsunami that hit coastal towns and villages in the south of the country.

The latest official death toll, considered far from complete, was 795 according to a statement by Bachelet Tuesday. Over two million people have been evacuated or left homeless.

Chile's ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, Carlos Portales, said damage assessment teams and equipment are needed. The most urgent needs are for portable bridges, satellite telephones, electrical generators, tents and field hospitals, and self-contained dialysis units.

"Actually, what people will need most is financial resources of their own, cash to provide themselves with whatever they need to rebuild and continue their lives," Francisco Vivero, head of Casa de Chile (Chile House), an organisation of Chileans living in Venezuela, told IPS as he packed his bags to go and help his relatives in Chile.

The European Union has already earmarked 5.4 million dollars in emergency aid to Chile, Japan is sending a donation of three million dollars, and China one million dollars. The Andean Development Corporation (CAF) placed its financial leverage at Santiago's disposal, and the Latin American Economic System (SELA) undertook to provide whatever help was requested.

Russia announced Tuesday it was sending two planes with humanitarian aid, while the Organisation of American States' (OAS) secretary-general José Miguel Insulza, himself a Chilean, arrived in Santiago Monday to find out what immediate support was required from the Inter-American system.

Lula, who went to Chile after attending the swearing-in ceremony Monday of José Mujica as the new president of Uruguay, said Brazil "will show as much solidarity to Chile as it did to Haiti," devastated by an earthquake Jan. 12 which left more than 200,000 people dead.

An essential difference between these two disasters, and the international aid offers each country received, is that Haiti is the poorest nation in the western hemisphere, while Chile is at the top of most regional rankings.

There is also a gulf between the two countries in terms of Chile's extensive experience in managing earthquake disasters and building quake-proof constructions.

This is why the international community has waited for the Chilean state itself to assess the damages and request specific help.

"Our hemisphere comes together in times of crisis, and we will stand side by side with the people of Chile in this emergency," said Secretary of State Clinton.

"We stand ready to offer what we're asked for now and to stay, as your partner and your

friend, for the long term. We'll be there to be of help when others leave, because we are committed to this partnership and friendship with Chile," she told Bachelet at a joint press conference.

Practically every country in the Americas sent messages of solidarity and condolences for the deaths and devastation caused by Saturday's quake and the subsequent tsunami, as well as offers of material aid according to their ability.

The offers from Bolivia and Peru particularly stood out, given their longstanding rifts with Chile over territories lost in a 19th century war, which are still the source of friction with Santiago, to the point that Bolivia has not had diplomatic relations with Chile since 1978, and Peru has a lawsuit pending against Chile at the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

"It is a dreadful thing to see our Latin American brothers and sisters killed by an earthquake. I feel that nature can't stand any more policies that destroy the environment, and that Mother Earth is getting angry. As we did for Peru and Haiti, we will share the little we have with the Chilean people," said Bolivian President Evo Morales.

In Peru, President García decreed a day of national mourning, with the national flag flown at half-mast on all public buildings. He said his country "is at the service of the Chilean people and government for whatever they need."

Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa not only expressed solidarity with Chile but also stressed the sympathy he felt for "our great friend" Michelle Bachelet because of the burden that has been thrust upon her.

In fact, a great many comments on the social networking sites express regret that the Chilean president, whose term ends Mar. 11, should have to spend her last days in office battling the aftermath of one of the worst catastrophes experienced in this country, accustomed though it is to natural disasters.

"She doesn't deserve this," "what a shame, poor Michelle," and "I'm so sorry for Bachelet" are frequently repeated comments on the Twitter account devoted to the Chilean earthquake, conveying a sense of special solidarity with the president, who in February had an approval rating above 80 percent, according to the polls.

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