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Mapuche resistance in Chile intensifies in response to police killing

written by M. Tiahui

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The November assassination of a young Mapuche man, Camilo Catrillanca, by a Chilean anti-terrorism police squad has intensified the centuries-old Mapuche Indigenous struggle and has brought thousands of Mapuche and Chilean allies out into the streets in protest.

The killing of 24-year-old Catrillanca on Nov. 14 is the latest flash point in the struggle over Mapuche ancestral lands, which has led leaders in Chile to treat some Indigenous land rights activists as terrorists — by, for example, charging and trying them under anti-terrorism laws.

Catrillanca, the grandson of a prominent Mapuche leader, was shot in the head while riding a tractor home after working in the fields near the town of Ercilla, in the Araucanía region. His death led to ongoing protests across the country.

The anti-terrorism “Jungle Commando” squad that shot Catrillanca erased the video recording of what happened. Initially, the Chilean authorities tried to limit the blame

for the assassination, but Mapuche people and their supporters were clear that blame and corruption are widespread and that this is part of an ongoing militarized campaign against Mapuche resistance.

Chile's right-wing president, Sebastián Piñera, has been forced by public outrage to ask multiple national police officials to resign. The Piñera government has been using anti-terrorism laws in existence since the Pinochet dictatorship as a cover to increase militarized force against the Mapuche.

Loss of Wallmapu homelands

The Mapuche comprise about 12 percent of the population in Chile and are the largest Indigenous nation there among nine recognized in the country.

Since the 1500s, when Spanish colonists first arrived in Wallmapu (traditional Mapuche territory located in Araucanía in Chile and Patagonia in Argentina), Mapuche have been defending their territory. Those early European invaders were never able to prevail, and, after the War of Independence from Spain, neither could the Chilean state, so it reached an agreement, recognizing the land south of the Bío-Bío River in south central Chile as Mapuche territory.

In the late 1800s, Chile began an expansion that continues to this day, sending in the army to clear the way for white settlers and pushing the Mapuche off much of their land in Araucanía. After Chile's "pacification" campaign ended, the Mapuche were placed on "reducciones" (reservations) similar to what Indigenous people endured in Canada and the U.S. Wallmapu was split by the Chilean and Argentinian borders, dividing the Mapuche into virtual captive nations within two colonizing countries.

Over the last century, the Mapuche have lost a large portion of their ancestral territory. Conditions improved somewhat for them during the brief presidency of

Salvador Allende and other presidents who engaged in some land reform efforts. But largely, the inherent rights of the Mapuche to their homelands — different in nature from the rights of campesino farmers — were not fully understood by governments or non-Indigenous social movements.

Under the Pinochet dictatorship of 1973-1990, the Mapuche land base was reduced from 10 million hectares (25 million acres) to under 400,000 hectares (a million acres), according to some estimates. Pinochet targeted Mapuche resisters and labeled them as terrorists for refusing to give up. The military dictatorship pursued policies that divided Indigenous communities, took control of lands for which the Mapuche did not have formal property titles, and encouraged the sale of the lands to large-scale farmers, lumber and energy companies, and other private owners.

Current President Piñera and his cronies plan major development of Araucanía that focuses on tourism and destructive corporate agriculture, forestry and energy projects that will intensify the devastating environmental losses already occurring. This will further displace and impoverish the Mapuche while creating profits for foreign and domestic capitalists.

Water is also a factor. Water in Chile is privatized and can be in short supply due to the huge amounts of water used by mining, commercial forestry, and other development. Araucanía has huge water reserves that are siphoned away to be squandered on these projects.

'We aren't the problem'



The Mapuche have continuously faced off against settler colonial, white supremacist institutions that have stolen their lands, excluded them socially, used their forced labor for sugar harvests, and forced women and children into domestic servitude. Their families have endured poverty and hunger and have often been forced to relocate to urban areas for economic reasons, with a third of them now living in Santiago. Their language and spiritual beliefs have been repressed.

Mapuche have taken autonomous control of some of their ancestral areas in Wallmapu (Mapuche homelands) and face constant harassment and targeting from settlers and police, especially from the "Jungle Commando" anti-terrorism forces. Some Mapuche are locked away as political prisoners in Chilean jails.

Their tactics include reclaiming land, protests, hunger strikes, burning corporate timber stands, and fighting against the proposed San Pedro dam project, mining, fish farms and other developments to which they have not consented.

At sacred Llao Llao Lake, Mapuche communities recently announced that they are engaged in reclaiming their lands and have demanded that logging companies and

repressive forces that only “care for the interests of capitalism” immediately leave the territory.

“The origins of this conflict must be dealt with,” [said Sergio Catrilaf](#), one of 11 Mapuches acquitted in 2017 for allegedly killing a settler couple. “There was a Mapuche nation here before the Chilean state arrived. We had and have our own organization; there were agreements made and violated. These have to be addressed. We aren’t the problem.”

The centuries-old struggle of the Mapuche exposes the violent reality of settler colonialism in Argentina as well as in Chile. The Mapuche and other Indigenous people in Argentina continue to resist and are politically repressed and targeted. Argentina continues to engage in a false national narrative that erases the existence of Indigenous peoples there, claiming instead that all of its inhabitants are supposedly of European descent.

