



CHILEAN MAPUCHES,

from indigenous mythical heroes to terrorists

Summer days in Chile are mostly uneventful. Not last summer though. On January 26 at 23:00 the police station of Tirua – a village located about a thousand kilometres south of the Chilean capital Santiago – was the target of the most ferocious Mapuche attack yet. By ANTONIO CASTILLO

The 40-minute assault – involving 80 Mapuche activists – was in response to a violent police rally against a group from this indigenous community. They were accused of stealing firewood from the property of Forestal Mininco, a forestry company owned by the Matte Group. One of the most powerful Chilean economic conglomerates, the Matte Group was one of the main supporters of the dictatorship of General Pinochet and still enjoys privileged status from the current democratic government.

The Tirua skirmish followed the January 7 armed assault on Mario Marchese, the CEO

of Trayenko hydroelectric company. Uninjured in the attack, Marchese is doing business with Norwegian's SN Power hydroelectric company. SN Power is planning to build 4 hydroelectric plants in the southern region of La Araucania, in the middle of traditional Mapuche land.

These incidents – and several others that preceded them – demonstrate that Chile is facing an increasingly volatile indigenous conflict. And the government, far from attempting to resolve the conflict, has deepened it by taking confrontational positions, such as the imposition of the anti-terrorist legislation against Mapuche leaders and organisations.



There are more than 37 Mapuches in jail under the anti-terrorist laws. This is the case of two well-respected lonkos (leaders), Pascual Pichun and Aniceto Norin, who were convicted under the anti-terrorist laws and sentenced to 10 years in prison for attacks on the property of Mininco Forestry Company. The government has labelled the Coordinadora Arauco-Malleco (Arauco-Malleco Coordinator or CAM), a peak Mapuche organisation that congregates some key Mapuche communities, as a terrorist organisation.

At the centre of the Mapuche demands are recognition of their culture, identity and land. They have been pushed to the margins of society and their ancestral land has been occupied by hydroelectric and forest companies.

"Hydroelectric companies – and also the forestry industry – are at the core of the contemporary conflict between Mapuche and the Chilean government," said Arturo Millahual, a young Mapuche leader based in Tirua.

This is a place I visited in the mid 1980s. Since then nothing much has changed. The problems of indigenous poverty, alcoholism and unemployment remain unsolved. "We are having a bad time," said Millahual. "What has changed

is the determination, especially among young Mapuches, to resist by any means the government's policy of land occupation."

This determination is being paid for dearly. Matias Valentin Catrileo, an agronomy university student, was gunned down by a police officer on January 3, 2007. He was one of 30 Mapuche activists who were attempting to occupy the fundo Santa Margarita in Vilcun, 600 kilometres south of Santiago. Owned by entrepreneur Jorge Luchsinger, this property is on ancestral Mapuche land and has been occupied by the local indigenous community.

The killing of Valentin Catrileo went unpunished. The investigation of the murder was given to the military justice and the perpetrator – a police officer – was declared innocent.

The mayor of Tirua, Adolfo Millahual – the only Mapuche ever elected to this position – said: "the process carried out by military justice has no guarantee of transparency or fairness." Aucan Huilcaman, a member of the Council of all Lands, an umbrella Mapuche organisation, described the ruling of the military justice as a disgrace. "This is a very negative sign given to the Mapuche community and we

believe less and less in the Chilean institutions and justice."

In Chilean history Mapuche resistance against the Spanish conquest is legendary. School children learn of the heroic actions of Mapuche leaders – such as Lautaro and Caupolican – who died resisting the Spanish invaders. They became mythical figures in the Chilean history books. Not any longer.

Today, Mapuche resistance has been criminalised and construed as terrorist acts. "From being seventeenth century resistance heroes against Spanish conquistadors we have become twenty first century terrorists," said Arturo Millahual. "We are not terrorists but we are tired of waiting and the actions of the resistance will not stop until the government answers our demands," he said.

The actions of the resistance have become more frequent, better organized and more aggressive. Burning trucks, land occupation and attacks on police stations are commonly used strategies. Some of them have been executed using rural guerrilla tactics. The use of M16 and lightening strikes speak of a highly sophisticated movement.

While the forestry companies have claimed the indigenous actions have been causing financial losses; the actual figures showed they have experienced a steady increase in earnings. "These companies are doing good business while the government is militarising the repression against Mapuche communities," said Millahual.

The militarisation and the application of antiterrorist laws has been criticised by Chilean legal experts. Judge Guzman, a leading judge who investigated the atrocities committed by dictator General Pinochet, said the Mapuche actions were a "political struggle and the government is not listening to the demands; on the contrary it has increased the criminalisation and repression".

Political analyst Raul Sohr said the application of the antiterrorist law was wrong. "While in international forums the government speaks of Chile as an emerging and peaceful society, at the same time it uses the antiterrorist law to charge

indigenous people." The Inter American Commission for Human Rights has also criticised the application of this draconian law against Mapuches. "The government describes the Mapuche actions as terrorism. This produces anger and feelings of injustice in this community," said historian Alfred Jocelyn-Holt.

Anger has also resulted from the government's failure to respond to the recommendations of the 2001 Commission for Reconciliation and Historical Truth. Established by former President Ricardo Lagos and formed by 20 experts in indigenous affairs, the Commission released its findings in 2003. Among the key points, the Commission recommended the constitutional recognition of indigenous people, the recognition of indigenous territory and their protection.

Equally important, the document recommended a process of consultation with indigenous communities and lonkos to obtain permission and authorisation when the State or private entities wanted to exploit natural resources located on Mapuche land. "In twenty days we will make public the policies destined to remedy the problems identified by the Commission," said President Lagos in 2003. Five years have passed and not one of the recommendations

has been adopted.

La Pintana is a long way from Tirua. La Pintana is one of the most impoverished shantytowns on the outskirts of Santiago. Here lives a small group of Mapuches. The lack of land and work in their communities has pushed them to urban areas, including the capital city. Here they have become the cleaners, the domestic servants and the gardeners of the white Chilean elite.

La Pintana is home to a handful of Mapuche cultural organisations. "We want to maintain our cosmology and pass it onto our children," said Jose Painemal. However keeping Mapuche tradition is not easy in a deeply racist society. Painemal had to change his Mapuche surname to a Spanish one. "I changed it to 'Contreras', I had to otherwise I would have not been able to get work."

The Mapuche people have been stigmatised as lazy and dishonest. Even my taxi driver showed no shame when he described them as "short and ugly". Racist comments coming from white Chileans are not uncommon. I heard this type of racist remark repeated again and again.

Carlos Pena, an influential public opinion writer, said that the forthcoming Chilean bicentenary independence celebrations had the potential to accentuate the conflict. "One century of policies

of indigenous forgetfulness has been accompanied by a complete negation of their existence," he said. "The Mapuche identity has been negated and therefore the conflict will not end."

The government has not responded well to the legitimate demands of Mapuche people. Despite the deepening and escalating conflict the current President, Michelle Bachelet, has seen no compelling reason to intervene. This is not surprising though. After all, the historical Mapuche demands never have been at the top of priorities for the white Chilean elite. ■



Mapuche (mapu: land; che: people) – or people from the land – is an indigenous nation that has been historically rooted in the centre-south of Chile. Ferocious warriors, the Mapuches halted the mid-1400 Inca expansion to the south of Chile. Equal fortune suffered later on the Spanish conquistadors who in the 1500s attempted to conquest them. It was a bloody resistance that lasted 300 years.

The Chilean independence from Spain in the early years of the 1800s became the beginning of the end of the Mapuche resistance. Pursuing geographical integration and nation state building, the Chilean post-colonial governments launched a massive offensive against Mapuches. In a war that lasted several decades, thousand of Mapuches died, their land was taken over and the survivors ended up in miserable indigenous reservations.

Today there are more than 600,000 Mapuches. This is approximately four percent of the 15 million people who live in Chile. They mainly live in the rural areas of the south of the country. However and due to land dispossession and lack of work a considerable number of them haven been forced to migrate to cities such as Santiago, Concepcion and Temuco.