

From The Sunday Times

February 27, 2010

Chile earthquake kills 122 and triggers tsunami



(David Lillo)

Vehicles that were driving along a highway that collapsed near Santiago overturned on the asphalt

Robin Henry

A massive earthquake has hit the coast of Chile, killing more than 100 people, flattening buildings and triggering a tsunami.

The 8.8-magnitude quake shook the country for a minute and half at 3:34am (6:34am GMT) today.

A tsunami warning has been extended across 53 countries, including most of Central and South America and as far as Australia and Antarctica.

The wave has already caused serious damage to the sparsely populated Juan Fernandez islands, off the Santiago coast, and is now travelling across the ocean at several hundred km per hour.

People in the Galapagos and on Easter Island have already taken refuge, while the US has started evacuating the shoreline communities of Hawaii.

At least 122 have been killed in the quake, according to Chile's national emergency office.

President Michelle Bachelet has declared a "state of catastrophe" in the country. Calling for calm from an emergency response centre, the outgoing president said: "We have had a huge earthquake, with some aftershocks.

"Despite this, the system is functioning. People should remain calm. We're doing everything we can with all the forces we have. Any information we will share immediately."

The quake hit near the town of Maule, 200 miles southwest of Santiago, at a depth of 22 miles underground.

The epicentre was just 70 miles from Concepcion, Chile's second-largest city, where more than 200,000 people live along the Bio Bio river.

TV Chile reported that a 15-storey building collapsed in the city, while other buildings caught fire and massive cracks opened up in the streets and bridges.

Cars turned upside down lay scattered across one damaged bridge.

Dozens of people were seen roaming through the streets, some wheeling suitcases behind them and others gathering around open fires to keep warm.

Many are terrified by the powerful aftershocks and are desperately trying to call friends and family.

The telephone and power lines are down in much of central Chile, making it difficult to assess the full extent of the damage close to the epicentre.

Chile is the world's top copper producing country and the quake halted operations at two major mines.

"Never in my life have I experienced a quake like this, it's like the end of the world," one man told local television from the city of Temuco, where the quake

forced staff to evacuate the regional hospital.

Santiago airport has been shut down and will remain closed for at least the next 24 hours after the passenger terminal suffered major damage.

In Talca, just 65 miles, from the epicentre, neighbours pulled at least five people from the rubble while emergency workers, themselves disoriented, asked for information from reporters.

The Foreign Office has updated its travel information for people planning to go to Chile, saying: "The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is in contact with our embassy in Santiago in order to establish the facts on the ground.

"Communications are sporadic. We will update this advice over the next few hours."

The Chilean ambassador, Rafael Moreno, said he was trying to help worried British-based relatives make contact with their families in the country.

In the coastal city of Vina del Mar, the earthquake struck just as people were leaving a disco, Julio Alvarez told a local radio station. "It was very bad, people were screaming, some people were running, others appeared paralyzed. I was one of them."

Several big aftershocks later hit the south-central region, including ones measuring 6.9, 6.2 and 5.6.

The earthquake was caused by the floor of the Pacific being pushed below South American land mass.

This sudden jerking of the sea-floor displaced water and triggered a tsunami, which is now crossing the ocean at a speed of a jet plane.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued a warning for Chile and Peru, and a less-urgent tsunami watch for Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica and Antarctica.

A spokesman said: "Sea level readings indicate a tsunami was generated.

"It may have been destructive along coasts near the earthquake epicentre and could also be a threat to more distant coasts."

All Pacific islands including the Hawaii and the Easter Islands have also received warnings.

US Civil Defense officials in Hawaii said they were preparing to start evacuations from shoreline communities.

The Joint Australian Tsunami Warning Center also warned of a "potential tsunami threat to New South Wales state, Queensland state, Lord Howe Island and Norfolk Island".

Any potential wave would not hit Australia until Sunday morning local time, it added.

On the Easter Islands people are now seeking higher ground before the wave strikes.

Earthquakes are relatively common in Chile, which is part of the pacific "ring-of-fire" tectonic-plate boundary, and many buildings are built to withstand tremors.

The largest earthquake ever recorded struck the same region on May 22, 1960. The magnitude-9.5 quake killed 1,655 people and left two million homeless.

The tsunami that it caused killed people in Hawaii, Japan and the Philippines and caused damage to the US West Coast.

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