



# Chile quake kills 214, triggers tsunami

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The death toll in the massive 8.8-magnitude earthquake that struck central Chile on Saturday has risen to at least 214 people, Interior Minister Edmundo Perez Yoma said.

Highways were sliced into pieces, rubble piled across streets and buildings were reduced to little more than heaps of wood after Saturday's pre-dawn earthquake struck about 325km northeast of the capital Santiago.

Nations around the world's largest ocean scrambled to evacuate coastal areas as they braced for walls of water as high as three metres. But there was no news of damage as the tsunami struck New Zealand and Tahiti.

The massive quake plunged much of the Chilean capital Santiago into darkness, snapping power lines and severing communications. The international airport was closed after being damaged.

"The tragedy is enormous. The earthquake is one of the most important in the world's history, with an enormous capacity of destruction," the Chilean ambassador to the US, Jose Goni, told CNN television.

But he offered reassurances, saying: "The situation is under control. I think we can manage this crisis."

It was the second major earthquake to hit the region in seven weeks after up to 300,000 people were killed in Haiti last month and 1.2 million left homeless by a 7.0-magnitude quake.

President Barack Obama said the toll could go into the hundreds.

The United States "stands ready to assist in the rescue and recovery efforts, and we have resources that are positioned to deploy should the Chilean government ask for our help", Obama said at the White House.

"Early indications are that hundreds of lives have been lost in Chile and damage is severe. On behalf of the American people, Michelle and I send our deepest condolences to the Chilean people," he said.

Obama telephoned Chilean President Michelle Bachelet to offer his condolences and offer any assistance.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who is leaving on Sunday on a previously scheduled trip to Latin America, said she's in close contact with Bachelet and that "our thoughts and prayers" go out to the victims.

The European Union said it will provide three million euros (\$4.58 million) in immediate assistance for Chile. Unlike impoverished Haiti, which was also struck by a devastating earthquake last month, Chile is one of Latin America's wealthiest countries.

"The people of Chile are in agony today but Britain stands ready to help. We will do whatever we can," British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said.

AFP journalists spoke of walls and masonry collapsing in Santiago while people in pyjamas fled onto the streets as buildings "shook like jelly".

"It was the worst experience of my life," said 22-year-old Sebastian, standing outside his house in eastern Santiago.

Many Chileans were still in nightclubs partying at the start of the weekend when the quake struck before dawn, ripping up roads, bringing roofs crashing down and toppling power lines.

"Friends who were at clubs said it was pandemonium," said Santiago resident Maren Andrea Jimenez, an American UN demography expert.

"It was scary! Plaster began falling from the ceiling. My dogs freaked out. I ran out and found everyone was totally drunk, it was Friday night."

The US Geological Survey said it had recorded more than 51 aftershocks ranging from 4.9 to 6.9 in magnitude since the pre-dawn quake.

A huge wave measuring 2.34 metres crashed onto the Chilean coastal town of Talcahuano just after the quake struck at 3:34am (1734 AEDT).

Easter Island, home to about 4,000 people and its mysterious statues, was partially evacuated, but the tsunami wave was not as big as feared reaching just over 30cm.

Roger Bilham, a professor of geological sciences at the University of Colorado, said the waves were racing across the Pacific Ocean at 720km/h.

"Mid-ocean, the wave is travelling at around the speed of a jet plane," Bilham told AFP.

Some 144,500 residents in coastal areas of Hawaii were evacuating coastal areas as warning sirens sounded around the island chain for the first time in 16 years.

Hawaiians were asked not to flush toilets as wastewater systems were temporarily shut down.

"If you live anywhere in the evacuation zone, you have to evacuate," John Cummings, Oahu Emergency Management Department spokesman, told local media.

Concepcion, about 115km southwest of the epicentre, was said by local TV to be among the first Chilean cities hit by waves.

Asian nations have been on heightened alert ever since a massive 2004 tsunami that killed more than 220,000 people around the Indian Ocean.

In the low-lying Philippines, officials warned residents in coastal areas to be prepare for an evacuation, and the Japanese government was on standby to help.

Earthquake-prone Chile lies along the Pacific rim of fire and is regularly rocked by quakes, but damage is often limited as they mostly hit in remote desert regions.

In May 1960 up to 5700 people were killed in the 9.5-magnitude Great Chilean Earthquake, which triggered a huge tsunami that reached as far as eastern New Zealand.

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