

Chilean police attack protesters against polluting state-owned energy firm



Santiago de Chile, September 11 (RHC)-- A march that began peacefully in the small town of Quintero, Chile about 145 kilometers northwest of the capital of Santiago, ended in a crackdown by national police with a reputation for violence and corruption.

The demonstrators were bringing attention to dangerous levels of toxic pollutants coming from the state-owned petroleum and extraction company, National Company of Petroleum and Gas (ENAP) near Quintero.

About 300 people gathered in the town, marching with banners against ENAP and what they say is the government's longtime neglect of environmental and public health protections in the region.

A homemade video shows a few unarmed protesters gathered with signs critical of ENAP when several national police members forcibly pushing them to the ground before arresting them. Another video posted by local media shows a wave of protesters running and police sirens sounding in the background. Tear gas was then launched at the fleeing protesters. Lieutenant Rolando Molina of the Quintero city police reported that 15 people had been detained for disorderly conduct, 2 of whom were minors.

Chilean public confidence in the national police, or Carabineros, has dropped significantly as 70 members of the security forces were found guilty of money laundering of \$38 million in 2017. Many have also been accused of using excessive force against Indigenous Mapuche land rights demonstrators in the country's

southern region.

In late August, approximately 300 people in Quintero and the nearby community of Puchuncavi had to seek medical treatment for nausea and vomiting allegedly caused by a 'toxic cloud' from ENAP.

Last week, Chile's environmental inspectorate (SMA) said it was bringing charges against ENAP for its failure to comply with environmental regulations regarding its liquid industrial waste treatment process in Quintero. The Environment Superintendent, Cristian Franz, said that short-term but high-intensity pollutants were recorded, prompting Quintero residents to fall ill.

The SMA indictment is based on a two-week investigation of ENAP's industrial operations. The company will also face government sanctions but will be allowed to continue operating.

Also last week, President Sebastian Piñera's Minister of the Environment Carolina Schmidt announced that: "All institutions, public or private, must comply with current environmental legislation." "No one is above the law," said Schmidt who is calling for immediate measures to ensure the public health in the area.

ENAP officials released a statement saying they "sharply" reject the SMA allegation. The company announced that "it will exercise all legal actions and rights that correspond to it to demonstrate that it has no connection whatsoever with the accusations (of environmental mismanagement)."

Residents in Quintero have long accused the government of ignoring their accusations that ENAP has been heavily polluting the Valparaíso region for years.

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