

Soledad O'Brien: Sadly, there are similarities between Haiti and Chile

By **Soledad O'Brien** and **Rose Arce**, CNN
March 1, 2010 3:09 p.m. EST



Rescue workers help an injured woman in Concepcion, south of Santiago, after Chile's 8.8-magnitude earthquake.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- The quake that shook Chile was 800 times more powerful than the one that hit Haiti
- Country's infrastructure built to withstand quakes, but death and destruction inescapable
- Reports: Dozens of aftershocks powerful enough to add to toll of injured and dead
- Wealthier and more prepared than Haiti, Chile and its people still share in the fear

Concepcion, Chile (CNN) -- We couldn't have traveled farther to see the same thing.

We were returning to the United States from Haiti -- where every turn continues to unveil another human tragedy even six weeks after the January 12 earthquake -- when we were redirected to Chile. An 8.8-magnitude quake had struck the area around Chile's capital, a seismic event 800 times more powerful than the one in Haiti.

Getting there was half the story. We took off from Miami, Florida, knowing the airport in Santiago was closed, so our aim was to get as close as we could. That set off a journey that would last 48 hours. We flew to Panama, Lima, Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires and Bariloche, then began a very long drive through the Patagonia region of Argentina, into Chile and north into the earthquake zone.

We were followed by an enormous full moon and skimpy clouds that danced along the skyline. This region seems too lovely to be the scene of any tragedy. Its tall green mountains peaked with whitecaps and broad lakes give way to fields and sparkly beaches.

CLOSE 



Video: Chile survivor stories

CLOSE 



Video: Struggling after a quake

CLOSE ✕



Video: Chile 'up and running'

RELATED TOPICS

- [Chile](#)
- [Natural Disasters](#)
- [Haiti](#)

South America had summer vacation until it was interrupted by this disaster. And it is, in a word, a [disaster](#).

Haiti, with its death toll and great suffering, sets the bar very high right now for what you can call a tragedy. But there is nothing inconsequential about hundreds of people dying, crushed in their own homes or swept away by a frantic sea.

Chile has had very powerful earthquakes before and is a modern and wealthy place compared with Haiti. But as we drove up through Ozoro, Las Violetas, Los Angeles and other lovely farming towns, we saw chunks of roadway and roofs fallen away, fractured bridges, people camped in tents among their cows.

Every Chilean we spoke to talked about how the previous earthquakes had pushed anyone with means to rebuild their homes or find new ones designed to withstand strong shaking. People here know what to do.

But the sight of military convoys and ambulances told the story of what 8.8 can do. An ambulance driver in Los Angeles said there had been dozens of aftershocks, many powerful enough to add to the rising toll of injured and dead in towns without many large structures. They were overwhelmed

and being dispatched to Concepcion, where a large population and tall structures meant more severe injuries.

There, we found looting and people walking the streets in search of water and gas. The largest buildings were missing entire walls, and glass had shorn off the sides. A light cold drizzle was getting everyone wet.

The vacation period means a lot of young people are out being mochileros (backpackers) and are separated from families by distance and downed phone lines. They have heard the stories of beach towns swept away and houses upended and are hitching rides at gas stations, hoping to find a way to reunite.

The aftershocks are like a rising tide here, a clear sign that this is not over, that the damage is not done. The farm stands and cottages of the back roads are crooked and empty; the city centers look abandoned and on the brink.

This country is not crying out for international assistance in the way [Haiti](#) did. It was prepared and has coping resources. This is a place that sends rescue workers to other countries because they're so good at it.

Yet its natural beauty and efficiency are not enough to diminish what connects these folks to Haiti -- that the people waiting for buses beside the blackberry fields along Panamericana Ruta 5 are running scared.