



8.12.16

## CHILE | Arson Attacks Target Churches

A Catholic church in Collipulli, in the Araucanía region of Chile, was burned down in the early hours of Aug. 9. The church, San Andres Chapel, is one of 16 churches destroyed by arson attacks since December 2015.

Both Catholic and Protestant churches have been targeted in the Araucanía and Bío-Bío regions of the country and despite a government investigation it is still unclear who exactly is behind them.

These regions have a long history of unrest due to the strong presence of Mapuche indigenous separatist or pro-autonomy groups; however, these groups have not historically targeted churches. Leaflets and signs left at the sites of the burned down churches have called for the release of Mapuche “political prisoners.”

Local sources told Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that the targeting of churches has perplexed many in the regions given that approximately 90% of the Mapuche are Christian, either Catholic or Protestant.

Signs left at Unión Cristiana Evangelical Church and the Santa Joaquina Catholic Chapel in Araucanía, which were both burned down March 31, stated: “We are going to burn all the churches.” Seven Protestant churches and nine Catholic churches have now been destroyed by arson attacks since Dec. 31.

Most of the attacks have taken place in the early hours of the morning. An attack on the Iglesia del Señor Evangelical Church in Temuco, Araucanía, on June 9 took place during an evening worship service. Armed, masked individuals ordered everyone inside out of the building before burning it down. An attack a week later on the San José de Limpeo Catholic Church in Collipulli, Araucanía, took place at night when no one was inside, but when emergency personnel responded to the reports of arson, they came under fire and one policeman was shot and wounded.

Local sources told CSW the attacks have created a climate of fear and had a devastating effect on Catholic and Protestant congregations, the majority of whom are from impoverished backgrounds and who do not have the resources to easily rebuild or replace the destroyed properties.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply concerned at the ongoing and serious arson attacks on Catholic and Protestant churches in Araucanía and Bío-Bío, Chile, a country which has otherwise had a very good record on religious freedom since the 1990s. We call on those responsible, whatever their motive, to cease targeting places of worship and to respect religious freedom. We also encourage the government to continue its investigations while respecting the human rights of the population, and extend our solidarity to the members and leaders of the affected churches who have suffered devastating losses."