

Chile Strengthens Border Patrol Ahead of Papal Visit



Santiago de Chile, January 9 (RHC)-- Chile is strengthening its border patrol ahead of a scheduled visit by Pope Francis in mid-January, as Indigenous leaders warn the pontiff is "not welcome." Thousands of police officers will be deployed in the Chilean capital of Santiago, where more than 500,000 people are expected to gather for a planned mass.

"We are going to see a record number of visitors," Reginaldo Flores, head of the interior ministry's border crossings unit, told Reuters. During his tour, the pontiff will hold a mass in Temuco, capital of the disputed Araucania region in southern Chile, some 600 kilometers from the capital.

The Mapuche, Chile's largest Indigenous group, have been trying to reclaim their territory in Araucania, located south of the Bio Bio river, which was taken over by the Chilean military in the late 19th century.

The lands were later colonized by European settlers who owned timber factories and ranches in the region, leaving the Mapuche poverty stricken and the region environmentally depleted.

Mapuche leaders have warned that the Papal visit may aggravate tensions in the poverty-ridden Araucania. In November, activists burned a bus and distributed pamphlets with the slogan "Fire to the churches. Pope Francis: you're not welcome to Araucania."

Pope Francis is also expected to visit the cities of Temuco and Iquique before heading to Peru, where

he's due to visit Lima, Puerto Maldonado and Trujillo.

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