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## Latin America: Chile protests provide a salutary lesson to region

By Naomi Mapstone

2/1/2012

When Camila Vallejo rallied tens of thousands of students across Chile to take part in months of protests last year, she put a face to a new generation of frustrated Latin American youth.

“Our fight is not versus the police or to destroy commercial shops,” the 23-year-old activist declared. “Our fight is to recover the right to education.” But the protests, which began with peaceful sit-ins and “kiss-ins”, quickly turned violent.

At the peak of the “Chilean winter”, as the campaign came to be called, police arrested almost 900 students in a single day against a background of looting and violent clashes.

In all of Latin America, Chile seemed an unlikely location for such unrest. With two decades of political stability and strong economic growth behind it, the country had earned a reputation as an oasis of calm.

The region’s fifth-biggest economy bounced back from an earthquake in 2010 and the global financial downturn in 2008 to grow at 6.6 per cent last year.

But the salutary lesson for the rest of Latin America is Chile’s failure to vanquish the region’s old foe – inequality. Despite significant economic and social gains in the past decade, Latin America still has the world’s highest levels of inequality.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Chile's schools and colleges are the second most segregated in the region, after Peru, when it comes to social class.

As the student protesters' banners pointed out, access to a quality education in Chile is still largely the preserve of the privileged: "Five years studying, 15 years paying."

"We are talking about a better-informed, more ambitious generation of young people in Latin America. Their dreams and aspirations are greater than their parents," says Guillermo Dema, Latin America specialist at the International Labour Organization (ILO).

He adds: "When they can't find a job or a place in university, the levels of frustration are enormous."

While the average unemployment rate across Latin America and the Caribbean was 6.8 per cent last year, the lowest since the mid-1990s, youth unemployment is running at 14.9 per cent, the ILO said in a report this month.

About 20 per cent of people aged 15-24 have slipped into the ni-ni – Spanish for "neither-nor" – generation, Mr Dema says. They are neither working nor studying, and their chances of entering formal employment are limited.

Colombia had the highest proportion of ni-nis, Mr Dema says, with 26 per cent of all youth out of a job and out of the education system.

Unemployment rates for young women are substantially higher, as are the rates for young people of African descent, principally in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru and Uruguay.

In a region in which 40 per cent of the population is under 30, governments and private entities are struggling to build on economic advances and improve the lots of the ni-ni generation.

Public policies targeting poverty, inequality and the region's sprawling informal sectors include cash transfer schemes for those living in extreme poverty, job creation, tax, education and social security reforms.

Mr Dema says Brazil has done better than most of its neighbours at strengthening school-to-work transitions and supporting the unemployed.

Chile, in the wake of the student protests, has increased scholarships, lowered interest rates on student loans from 6 per cent to 2 per cent and offered subsidies to young workers on low wages. Colombia is planning 250,000 new training places for unemployed youth.

Jurgen Weller, a senior economist at the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) and the Caribbean in Santiago, says moves to boost technical education are crucial to building on improvements in access.

“Typically, young people who finish secondary school aspire to university and, if they don’t make it, they feel like losers. There is a lack of technical courses providing a good, faster, intermediate qualification,” he says.

ECLAC is cautiously forecasting 3.7 per cent economic growth across the region this year, depending on how the European and North American economies hold up.

Over the past decade, poverty has fallen from 50 per cent to 30 per cent and inequality has steadily declined.

But Mr Weller points out that education reforms are structural and long-term, and often fraught with tensions between students, teachers and other parties.

“Many of the countries in South America have received a big boost from natural resources demand from Asia, above all China. Their economies have grown, and generated employment and dynamism,” says Mr Weller.

“But it’s not simply a matter of resources. There are many actors that have to agree [on reforms such as education]. There has to be a social pact for change.”