



A woman walks past a walled store reading “No more repression. State terrorism!” in Valparaiso, Chile, on Dec 11, 2019. — AFP photos



A man looks at rubble after a fire caused by protesters in Valparaiso.



Men work on the security of a bank's shutter.

ONCE PICTURE-PERFECT, VALPARAISO BEARS SCARS OF CHILE PROTESTS

Torched and looted shops, smashed windows, boarded up storefronts — months of social unrest still rattling Chile has taken its toll on one of the country's most colorful tourist attractions, the port city of Valparaiso. The often violent protests have inflicted heavy damage on the UNESCO World Heritage site, particularly along the city's iconic Carlos Condell street, a once-thriving street dominated by restaurants, shops and banks.

“This place had life. It's sad and depressing now,” said 72-year-old Fresia Valdez, as she walked along a thoroughfare pockmarked with burned-out stores. More than 100 shops and businesses were looted and burned out on this one street alone. Some were torched by rioters and left abandoned. Others were quickly renovated, and are now hidden behind ugly metal security screens for guard against repeat attacks.

Shop owners have pasted grim “Merry Christmas — Shop Open” signs on some screens, the only reminder that a shop exists at all inside the metal barriers. Customers have to duck through small openings to get inside. Some of the metal gates carry graffiti with insults directed at the police and right-wing President Sebastian Pinera. “At my age, I will not see my Valparaiso alive again,” said Valdez.

Around her, the smell of molten metal hung in the air as welders erected shutters outside a bank. “We are protecting the bank from disturbances and looting. This bank was vandalized too — they went inside and smashed things up,” says Andres Varas, a 39-year-old welder. Varas said he had recently done similar work on about 20 other banks across the Valparaiso region.

‘Pearl of the Pacific’

With its stairways, sinuous streets and church spires, the city's historic quarter was recognized 16 years ago by UNESCO as a site of outstanding universal value for its rich tapestry of history, architecture and urban development. The port city — once known as the “Pearl of the Pacific” — has long been one of the

Congress, a key target of demonstrators but which remains heavily guarded.

Locals say that the damage from the social protests, which began on Oct 18, is more noticeable in the center of the city, where the building housing the country's oldest newspaper, El Mercurio, was set on fire. In the hills around the city, where the attractions include the home of Chilean

poet Pablo Neruda, the destruction is less evident. “They all go home super early,” said Hugo Morales, 72, who owned a kiosk that was looted and burned during the unrest. “At four or five in the afternoon, you have nowhere to go to buy anything,” said Valdez.

A few meters from the remnants of Morales' 50-year-old business stands the charred ruins of a car showroom, now a mass of twisted ironwork,



A woman exits a walled store with a sign reading “Merry Christmas. Store open”.



A man walks past a walled shoe store reading “Keep fighting!”

country's main attractions, with its multicolored cliff-top buildings, its maze of hills and funicular trams.

But the protests have taken their toll on the city's tourism industry, the engine of the local economy. During October, hotel occupancy fell by half, while trade in the city plummeted by more than 17 percent, according to the local chamber of commerce. Situated 120 km from the capital Santiago, Valparaiso houses the

poet Pablo Neruda, the destruction is less evident.

Fearful residents

Business owners say the violence has altered the mood in the city. As soon as dusk falls, the streets begin to empty out. Until recently, the city remained animated and lively well into the night — especially in the summer months, when the city attracts around two million visitors. “Before, in the streets, you could walk calmly and now people are

fallen masonry, and burnt-out vehicles. Local business owners complain the ruin has become a hang-out for delinquents. Valparaiso is one of three cities most affected by the violence with Santiago and Concepcion in the south — they suffered a combined \$2.5 billion in damage, according to the Chilean builders' association. — AFP