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Headline: Chile official warns of 'worst front in a decade' after floods, evacuations

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A view of a flooded area after heavy rains Santiago, Chile, June 23, 2023. REUTERS/Ivan Alvarado

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SANTIAGO — Days of heavy rainfall have swollen Chile's rivers causing floods that blocked off roads and prompted evacuation in the center of the country, amid what has been described as the worst weather front in a decade.

On Friday, residents of the capital Santiago were surprised by a large mass of brown water flowing down the bed of the Mapocho river, the city's main waterway, which has risen substantially with the recent heavy rains.

The flooding around the Mapocho river has also cut off routes leading towards the Pacific Ocean, hitting families who live on its banks and leaving small towns isolated.

This led authorities to declare a "red alert" and order preventive evacuations in various towns in the south of Santiago.

"This is the worst weather front we have had in 10 years," Santiago metropolitan area governor Claudio Orego said. A weather front, or boundary between different types of air, signals a change in the weather often causing rain, thunderstorms and tornadoes.

Franco Rodriguez, a resident from the small town of Noviciado, said he was woken up at night by neighbors telling him and his family to leave their home.

"At around 3.00 or 3.30 a.m. the river burst and we had to run," he said.

The flooding of the Mapocho river has also affected parts of the busy route that connects Santiago with the key port city of Valparaiso.

In mountainous tourist areas around the Maipo river, authorities have since Thursday been moving residents out of their towns due to the risk of landslides and further flooding.

Maipo and Mapocho are the main rivers that bring water to the capital. City authorities have called on citizens to collect drinking water as supplies could be jeopardized by the changes in the water as they mix with mud and other contaminants.

Rains are forecast to continue at least through to Saturday morning.

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Climate change drives increasingly extreme weather. The Chilean rains come just a few months after a period of wildfires amid a severe drought that destroyed hundreds of homes and left dozens of people dead.