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UPDATED | UMass junior Rebecca L. Walsh studying in Chile is safe after massive quake

By: **Matt Rocheleau** | February 27, 2010 |

A University of Massachusetts junior studying abroad in Chile said she is safe after the South American nation was rocked by one of the strongest earthquakes ever recorded over the weekend.

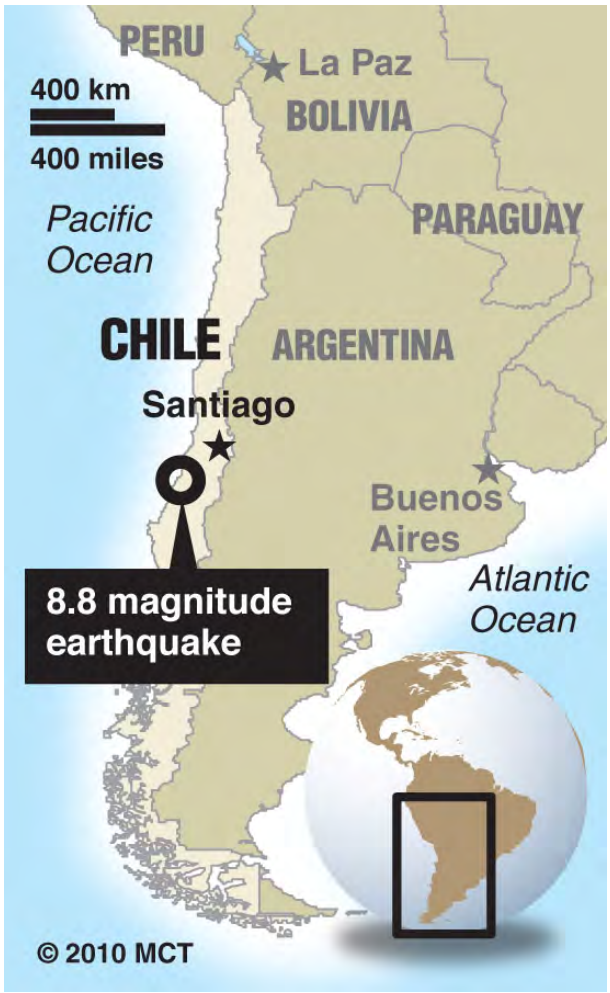
Rebecca L. Walsh, 20, of Lowell, Mass., was in Santiago, Chile – the nation's capital and largest city – when an 8.8-magnitude earthquake hit early Saturday morning, killing an estimated 708 people, displacing 2 million and severely damaging around 500,000 homes, according to the Associated Press (AP).

Walsh, a Spanish and sociology double major, arrived in Chile on Thursday

"I'm fine, all is well," said Walsh in a Facebook message to the Collegian yesterday. "As bad as the news is, I didn't go through that bad of an experience."

The worst part of it, she said, was that she was out with friends and far from the hotel when the quake hit.

"We stayed away from the buildings as much as possible,



Map locating epicenter of 8.8 magnitude earthquake in central Chile.

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just in case of falling rubble," (MCT)
said Walsh. "We ended up walking back to the hotel when the sun came up and got to see a lot of the damage before it was cleaned up."

The structural integrity of the hotel she was staying in was questionable, so she said she and her friends left as soon as they could.

"Luckily, the building codes in Chile are really strict, and I didn't see any serious damage," she added.

Walsh and the other students in the study abroad program will be going to meet their host families today in Valparaíso and Viña del Mar, Chile. Walsh will be staying in the coastal city of Valparaíso, where she will live until the study abroad program ends in July

"Unfortunately, two of the families – we don't know which yet – are currently looking for new homes because theirs sustained too much damage," she said.

The hotel she was staying in is an all-inclusive resort hotel, "which is really bizarre, considering the country is in a disaster mode," she said.

"Having this many people so worried is really weird for me," Walsh added. "We finally have Internet, which is nice because I've been able to actually talk to my family."

Walsh's boyfriend, Kenneth Burdett, a UMass junior and nursing major from Branford, Conn., said his mom called him Saturday when she heard the reports of the earthquake, and he was relieved when Walsh's sister, Theresa Walsh, called him later that day to say his girlfriend was safe.

Burdett, who said he has been in a relationship with Walsh since fall 2009, told the Collegian he has spoken with Rebecca Walsh several times since Saturday's earthquake.

"She sounded pretty calm," said Burdett in a phone interview late afternoon on Saturday. "Her hotel had some structural damage, but I don't think anyone around where she's staying was injured."

Walsh said the best thing members of the UMass community can do is to help support and donate to the various ongoing relief efforts there.

A $10 donation will be made to the Red Cross' relief efforts in Chile from those who text "CHILE" to 90999. Other organizations, including Habitat for Humanity, World Vision, Salvation Army and The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), set up similar donation systems for mobile phone users. A list of some of the agencies providing aid in Chile is available here and here.

"Honestly, what I've been through hasn't been too traumatic, and I just hope that this gets people to help out those who have been truly affected more towards the south," Walsh said.

"Maybe the weirdest thing about this whole experience has been talking to Chileans, who showed up to work in the hotels we're staying in, despite having family in the worst-struck areas who they hadn't been able to talk to yet," she added. "One woman apologized to me for not having clean towels for us, because some of the staff hadn't shown up to work. It was like 'Are you kidding? I can't believe you're even here.'"

Walsh was one of 14 UMass students who received funding to study abroad this semester through the Gilman Scholarship program, said a December 2009 University press release. The other 13 students who received the scholarship are studying abroad elsewhere.

A U.S. Geological Survey geophysicist told the AP that the Chilean quake was hundreds of times more powerful than the Jan. 12 magnitude-7 earthquake that devastated Haiti. However, the one that struck Chile Saturday hit deeper below the Earth's surface and has cost far fewer lives.

The quake was felt as far away as Sao Paulo, Brazil, which is about 1,800 miles east of the earthquake's epicenter, according to the AP. Santiago is about 200 miles northeast of the epicenter, while Valparaíso is about 75 miles west of the capital city. The full extent of the damage remains unclear as Chile has been struck by more than 50 powerful aftershocks throughout the day, said AP reports.

Saturday's quake also sent a tsunami through the Pacific Ocean, which left Hawaiian residents scrambling to find higher ground after the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued a tsunami warning earlier in the day. However, the AP has reported that the warning was later canceled, and little damage has been reported there thus far.

The earthquake in Chile matched one that struck off Ecuador's coast in 1906 as the seventh-strongest ever recorded, according to the AP.

The largest earthquake ever recorded – a magnitude-9.5 quake that killed 1,655 people and left 2 million homeless – struck the same area of Chile on May 22, 1960, according to the AP. It caused a tsunami that killed people in Hawaii, Japan and the Philippines and caused damage along the United States' west coast.

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mrochele@dailycollegian.com.

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