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Chilean President Michelle Bachelet on Saturday warned that towns surrounding Region X's Chaitén Volcano, which has been in constant eruption since May 2, **might become permanently unlivable**

Bachelet's remarks came after the National Geologic and Mining Service (SERNAGEOMIN) delivered her an ominous report putting the possibility of the volcano's collapse above 50 percent. "There are experts who say that lava from the Chaitén Volcano could flow directly towards the town of Chaitén," said Bachelet. "These experts are recommending that the town of Chaitén never be inhabited again."

SERNAGEOMIN vulcanologist Luis Lara first disclosed on Thursday that the volcano could implode, thus releasing a stream of red-hot pyroclastic material (burning gas and rock) capable of destroying everything in its path. Pyroclastic flows are rapid currents of hot gas and rock that can escape from a volcano crater and travel downhill toward surrounding areas.

The Chilean daily La Tercera reported on Sunday that a SERNAGEOMIN study had put the odds of such a collapse as at least 50 percent. The document said that there was increased build-up in the dome of magma currently covering the volcano's crater. Furthermore, the material accumulating in the area was "highly dense," and thus more prone to collapse.

SERNAGEOMIN said that any implosion would cause complete destruction of everything within a 15 kilometer radius around the peak, an area which encompasses Chaitén, Santa Barbara, and several rural farming villages.

Bachelet, who had returned on Friday to the area affected by the eruption, acknowledged this threat while touring the town of Palena.

"The people (who live in the area around the volcano) represent our top priority right now," Bachelet said. "This tremendous column of burning rock and magma could reach speeds of between 100 and 400 kilometers per hour. At that rate, it could reach the town of Chaitén in six minutes."

Still, Bachelet said that not all scientists agreed on the possibility of such an event, adding that some officials had even suggested that local communities covered in ash by the volcano blasts could be fully functional within a few years.

"We have never had a situation quite like this in Chile," she said.