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Army Shoots Dead Seven Indigenous Protesting Rising Electricity Bills from ENERGUATE

By Louisa Reynolds

After electricity costs in the northwestern department of Totonicapán doubled in less than a year to almost US\$12, Mayan K'iche' community leader Juana Celestina Batz Puac decided that enough was enough. "It's too much," she says, shaking her head.

To Batz Puac, it seems hugely unfair that desperately poor campesino families that barely have one light bulb per household should be subjected to a seemingly arbitrary price hike. "They need to listen to our demands....As indigenous people, we're using their energy and they're getting rich at the expense of the people," she says.

Totonicapán's 48 cantons are particularly angry because street lighting doesn't reach them, and, in May, protestors occupied the ENERGUATE electricity company's office in the departmental capital. However, the company insisted that it could only charge the amount that the government's Comisión Nacional de Energía Eléctrica (CNEE) stipulates it can charge and their demands went unheeded.

Totonicapán is one of Guatemala's poorest departments (82.2% of its population suffers from chronic malnutrition), but collective action runs deep in its history and indigenous leaders decided to erect two blockades on the Inter-American Highway on Oct. 4 at a point known as Cumbre de Alaska (Kilometer 170) and a busy junction known as Cuatro Caminos (Kilometer 188).

The day before, indigenous leaders had already announced their intention to block the highway, and police officers wearing riot gear had arrived in the early hours of the morning. While the blockade took place, Totonicapán's 48 cantonal leaders arrived at the presidential palace at around 2 p.m., where they were denied entry and told that President Otto Pérez Molina, a hard-line retired Army general, would not see them.

Dozens of police vehicles and at least two Army vehicles were sent to the Inter-American Highway. What happened next is currently under investigation by the Attorney General's Office as different versions of events have emerged.

Interior Minister Mauricio López Bonilla said that, as protestors refused to clear the area, the police was forced to use tear gas to disperse the crowd and the Army was sent in to help. However, he claimed that the soldiers were unarmed and that most of the wounded had suffered shotgun and machete wounds, meaning that a scuffle had broken out among the protestors and seven people had been killed in the midst of the ensuing chaos. He also claimed that protestors had pelted the police with stones and had torched several Army and police vehicles. López Bonilla added that freedom of movement had to be defended and respected above anything less.

Dozens of civilians suffered intoxication from tear gas, 34 were injured, and the initial death toll of four that was reported by the media rose to seven: Santos Nicolás Hernández, Jesús Francisco Puac, Arturo Félix Fapón, Eusebio José Puac, Jesús Cano, Santos Nicolás Menchú, and Rafael Batz, all from the villages of Pasajoj, Chipuac, Vásquez, and Panquix.

The protestors' side of the story is very different. "Those who attended the blockade say that the Army opened fire on them," said indigenous leader Carmen Tacam during a press conference. She also stressed that the protestors were unarmed and that some were carrying the "wand of community authority" (vara de autoridad comunitaria, a wooden stick handed to the community's leader when he or she is elected during a traditional Mayan ceremony).

The Procuraduría de los Derechos Humanos (PDH) also reported that, contrary to what López Bonilla had claimed, the soldiers sent to help the police disperse the crowd were armed with Israeli manufactured Galil rifles, used by the armed forces during Guatemala's 36-year-long civil war.

The government has also claimed that civilian-clad agitators infiltrated the protest and opened fire on the police, who were forced to retaliate. This has been vehemently denied by protestors.

The UN and the diplomatic corps have strongly condemned the government's actions during the protest. "It's regrettable that a legitimate demonstration should leave seven people dead. Asking the Army to intervene in civilian security tasks is too high a risk," said Alberto Brunori of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Anger at foreign minister's remarks

On Oct. 5, local shops throughout Totonicapán remained closed as a sign of mourning for the seven protestors who were killed, and people took to the streets in the departmental capital's main square, bearing placards calling for justice and an end to repressive government policies. Nobel Peace laureate Rigoberta Menchú travelled to the area on a fact-finding mission.

While Totoncapán was still in mourning, sadness suddenly turned to wrath, after Foreign Minister Harold Caballeros tried to lessen the gravity of the incident by saying that many more people die each day as a result of a rising tide of violence. "Every day we have twice as many murders in this country so it's really not such a big deal," said Caballeros, a former evangelical preacher.

To make matters worse, Caballeros used his Twitter account to refer to his critics as "asses" and "jerks." He later apologized and said that the latter remarks had been made in the heat of anger. However, Menchú and other indigenous leaders responded by labeling Caballeros a "racist" and demanding his immediate resignation. Even President Pérez Molina said that a government official "cannot afford to talk to people in such a manner."

The Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) and Menchú's Movimiento Winaq have also summoned Caballeros to Congress so that he can be held to account for the incident.