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Violence Increases in Bolivia as Strike Continues

by LADB Staff

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In the most serious domestic crisis since Bolivian President Hugo Banzer assumed office in August 1997, the labor confederation Central Obrera Boliviana (COB) began a general strike April 1, demanding wage increases and protesting government economic and social policies. President Banzer says the government cannot meet the strikers' demands. Meanwhile, the death toll mounts as violent clashes between security forces and coca growers continue. The strike went into effect after a marathon meeting in which labor rejected the government's wage-increase offer of 6.5% for teachers, 5% for health workers, 2% for the military and police, and no increase for other public employees. At the same time, the government raised the minimum monthly wage from US\$45 to US\$54, a figure the COB considers unacceptable.

The COB is demanding a US\$650 minimum wage. Several times since the strike began, Banzer has threatened to declare a state of emergency if the violence and disorder continue. "The government will take whatever measures the current situation requires. Declaring a state of emergency is a constitutional prerogative," said government spokesman Mauro Bertero. The government "has an obligation to maintain public order." A state of emergency would be politically costly for the president, however. Banzer has worked hard to convince the public that he has left behind the heavy-handed tactics used during his de facto regime in the 1970s and that he is now firmly committed to democratic rule. A state of emergency could mar that image.

Coca growers block highways in the Chapare

When the government offer was rejected, teachers and health-care workers walked off the job, and coca growers set up barricades to block major highways. While for teachers and other state workers the major issue is wages, the coca growers are protesting the government's reduction of the compensation paid for voluntary eradication of coca fields. Compensation was reduced in March from US\$2,500 per hectare to US\$1,650, and the government's anti-drug trafficking plan calls for further reductions until the compensation is totally eliminated by 2002.

Coca growers also want more alternative- development programs in the region. Crop-substitution programs have failed miserably in Bolivia, often for lack of technical assistance. At times, coca growers voluntarily destroyed crops in one area to receive the compensation, while they planted more coca elsewhere. At least 300,000 people in the Chapare depend on coca-leaf cultivation for their livelihood. Banzer has vowed to remove Bolivia from the list of drug- producing countries during his five-year term, but he needs international aid to succeed. When the US announced plans to cut anti-narcotics aid to Bolivia from US\$40 million to US\$12, Bolivian Vice President Jorge Quiroga went to Washington to convince US lawmakers that such a cut would seriously hamper Bolivia's cooperation with US anti-drug efforts.

After his visit, Quiroga said he was confident that much of the cut aid would be reinstated, although it will be directed toward interdiction. Funds for alternative development and voluntary-eradication

compensation will be eliminated or reduced significantly. Critics of the US anti- drug policy in Bolivia say concentrating on interdiction allows the US to continue to send weapons, equipment, vehicles, ammunition, and other supplies for the military. When the strike began, coca growers blocked the highways between Cochabamba and Santa Cruz de la Sierra and between Cochabamba and Oruro. Seven strikers were reportedly killed in clashes with police during the first week.

"The government must live up to the agreement it made last Oct. 17 with the coca growers, which called for the installation of an agroindustrial complex and the execution of alternative-development plans in the Chapare to peacefully replace the coca fields," said Delfin Olivera of the Federacion de Campesinos Cocaleros. Olivera was part of a congressional human rights commission delegation that went to the Chapare to investigate government repression against the strikers.

On April 4, Minister of Labor Leopoldo Lopez admitted the government made a "strategic error" in its use of force in the first days of the strike. He said the government response increased the violence and damaged the government's image. Nevertheless, Government Minister Guido Nayar said drug traffickers are behind the roadblocks in the Chapare, "not to support the salary demands of the workers but to prevent the government from carrying out its eradication plans."

On April 8, the government sent hundreds of police and army troops to the Chapare to remove the roadblocks. Although they encountered some resistance, they cleared the roads, allowing the hundreds of buses and trucks that had been stranded for nearly a week to move. Banzer said the "government will make every effort to continue the dialogue and avoid declaring a state of emergency." But he justified sending troops into the Chapare to clear the roadblocks "because the Constitution allows the military to support the police when necessary."

Government says demands "not negotiable"

In La Paz, meanwhile, teachers have begun a hunger strike, and two teachers were symbolically crucified in the main plaza. The teachers not only reject the government's wage offer but also oppose the government's educational-reform plan, which includes competency testing of teachers. The conflict has kept schools closed for all but one week since the term began March 1. Hope for dialogue was reduced when Education Minister Tito Hoz de Vila suggested that teachers return to the classrooms and end the strike in exchange for getting their March paychecks.

Although sporadic negotiations have taken place between the COB and the government since the strike began, the COB walked out April 8 when government negotiators refused to allow Evo Morales, leader of the coca growers, to sit at the negotiating table in La Paz. "The government cannot decide which of our leaders will be allowed to engage in the conversations," said Luis Cutima, another leader of the coca growers. "It is just looking for a way to break off the negotiations to continue the abusive repression." Morales, a congressional deputy, recently said he has proof the president's family had links to drug trafficking during Banzer's stint as military dictator.

Pro-government legislators are demanding that Morales' immunity be lifted and that he face legal charges for his accusations. The COB has blamed the government for the violence. A COB communique said the government "denies all our rights, demands, and civil guarantees when it condemns us to live on miserable starvation wages." Economy Minister Edgar Millares said the

country's economic problems make it imperative that Bolivians practice severe austerity this year, and large wage increases would cause "catastrophic effects on the national economy."

The Banzer administration repeated on April 13 that several COB demands "are not negotiable," including the coca growers' insistence that the government end forced eradication, the teachers' opposition to the education reform, and the COB's call for a tenfold salary increase. To demonstrate its firmness, on April 15 the government sent 3,000 troops into the Chapare to destroy coca fields. In the violent clashes as campesinos tried to protect their crops, at least one person was killed and many more were wounded. [Sources: El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 04/03/98, 04/05/98; CNN, 04/04/98, 04/06/98, 04/08/98; Inter Press Service, 04/08/98; The Miami Herald, 04/07/98, 04/09/98; Reuter, 04/01/98, 04/02/98, 04/08/98, 04/12/98; Notimex, 03/05/98, 04/03/98, 04/05/98, 04/08/98, 04/14/98; Clarin (Argentina), 04/07/98, 04/14/98; Spanish news service EFE, 03/31/98, 04/01/98, 04/03/98, 04/06/98, 04/06/98, 04/12/98, 04/14-16/98; Associated Press, 04/06/98, 04/08/98, 04/13/98, 04/16/98]

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