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## President Toledo Declares a State of Emergency

by LADB Staff

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Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo declared a national state of emergency on May 27 in response to weeks of widespread strikes and protests that affected transportation as well as education, health, and agriculture. Teachers defied the state of emergency and continued their protests, but after mediation by Bishop Luis Bambaren, a tentative agreement was reached on June 4.

The labor problems add to the headaches of the president, whose approval rating is now about 12%. Thousands of campesinos and state health workers had joined 280,000 members of the Sindicato Unico de Trabajadores de la Educacion (SUTEP) in recent weeks to march through the streets and block highways. The demonstrators were demanding better salaries and working conditions and a reduction in taxes on agricultural products.

Toledo promised wage increases during his election campaign but later agreed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to shelve raises. Unions and opposition parties have been calling for a drastic change in the government's economic policies.

"We are not calling for a revolution," said Confederacion General de Trabajadores del Peru (CGTP) president Mario Huaman. "What we are asking for, and this is what the majority of Peruvians are asking for, and even why Toledo was elected, is that resources be directed toward satisfying social demands through an extensive tax reform that stops taxing consumption but taxes those who have more. That is what occurs in any reasonable country."

Despite a good economic-growth level of 5.2% in 2002 the highest in Latin America and an annual inflation rate of 1.5%, many Peruvians are angry with Toledo, saying he has failed to keep his promise to create jobs and reduce poverty. Many also demand that the government cut salaries of top politicians like Toledo, who earns US\$12,000 a month plus additional perks seen as scandalously high in a country where more than half the population of 27 million live on US\$1.25 or less a day.

### *Toledo sends out military*

"We have decided to declare a national state of emergency for 30 days so that people can exercise their personal liberties and travel freely," said Toledo in a televised address. "The country cannot be shut down. Democracy without order and without authority is not democracy. Tolerance has its limits." The state of emergency gives police and the military the authority to use force to clear the highways, restore order, detain strikers, and enter homes without warrants. It also limits freedom of movement and prohibits public assembly.

It was the second time Toledo had declared a state of emergency. The first was in June 2002 after three people were killed during protests against the privatization of local utility companies in

Arequipa, in southern Peru. That decree was lifted five days later, after the government suspended the planned auction (see NotiSur, 2002-06-21).

The government also said that the strikes by teachers and agricultural workers would be considered illegal. Teachers were given six days to return to their classrooms or face dismissal.

Union leaders said the strike would continue. In his speech, Toledo said that his government was doing everything possible to respond to the public's social demands, but that spending had to stay within the national budget. Teachers, who have been on strike since May 12, earn about US\$200 a month. They are asking for an increase of US\$60, but the government says it can only afford to increase their wages by US\$29.

Economy Minister Javier Silva Ruete said the funds needed to meet the striking teachers' demands simply do not exist, and he said that he would not issue currency "because the country has made a commitment to the IMF and World Bank to maintain fiscal discipline."

"If the government doesn't change its policy of kneeling down before the IMF...it's going to have to go," said Jorge Vargas, a high school teacher from the northern city of Chimbote during a protest in front of the Congress.

### *State of emergency seen by some as necessary*

The president's action had the support of many political parties and the business community, many of whom said the government was left with few options. "The administration could not sit by and watch the country spiral into chaos. There might have been other options, but something had to be done," said Javier Aida, president of the Lima Chamber of Commerce.

The US Embassy in Lima released a statement supporting Toledo's government, and Otto Reich, US President George W. Bush's special envoy to the Western Hemisphere, also supported the action. "The president acted within the laws and constitution of Peru. He felt it was necessary to establish this temporary measure to restore order," said Reich. "Democratic governments have a right to protect their people."

But major unions, including the CGTP, and the opposition Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA) party, condemned the president's move. CGTP secretary general Juan Jose Gorriti said the state of emergency was unnecessary. "These problems did not just arise, they have existed for a long time, and the government has resorted to repression to block popular protest," said Gorriti.

Former President Alan Garcia (1985-1990) said the state of emergency would do nothing to solve the problems. "The state of emergency will last 30 days, but the situation suffered by millions of teachers and farmers will not change. They will remain in misery," Garcia said. Toledo, who took office in July 2001, is viewed as a weak, indecisive leader by most Peruvians.

"He shows very weak leadership, which has caused problems to get out of control, to the point that he now wants to compensate for his weakness with the extreme measure of turning control of internal order over to the military," said APRA leader Jorge del Castillo.

Analyst Humberto Panessi, a sociologist at the Universidad Catolica in Lima, said Toledo's declaration of the state of emergency would move him further to the right and closer to conservative sectors.

Toledo "called out the armed forces as his first step in subduing the social crisis, while it should have been a last resort," said former Sen. Enrique Bernales, a member of the Comision Andina de Juristas (CAJ), who added that "the country's governability has been gravely affected."

Critics also said the president's actions tend to discourage compromise. In the anti-privatization protests in Arequipa and the protests of transportation owners and coca farmers earlier this year, opponents have seen that Toledo's government is prone to giving in.

"The message is extremely clear," said human rights activist Carlos Basombrio. "Protest hard, block economic activity, and you will get results." Basombrio said Toledo needs to make profound changes that include filling his Cabinet with better qualified ministers from across the political spectrum and cutting the high salaries of government officials to set an example of austerity.

## *Protests bring violence*

Despite the presidential decree, the SUTEP voted to continue with the strike, rejecting Toledo's measure as "unconstitutional and anti-democratic." SUTEP leader Nilver Lopez said that the strike would go on, adding that US\$200 a month covers less than half the US\$450 cost of the basic basket of foodstuffs, forcing most teachers to look for second and even third jobs.

"We ask the government to solve the problems of teachers, court workers the entire country. But it has responded with slammed doors and a state of emergency," said Joaquin Gutierrez, deputy secretary general of the CGTP. The following day, in several cities including Lima, the police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse protesters. Armored vehicles and thousands of soldiers carrying assault rifles patrolled the streets.

On May 29, soldiers killed 22-year-old student Eddie Quilca Cruz who was with a group protesting the state of emergency. At least 45 others were injured as students demonstrated in front of the Universidad Nacional del Altiplano, in Puno, 850 km southeast of Lima. More than 250 people were detained. Although authorities said the student was the only fatality, his friends said soldiers also killed at least three other young people and took their bodies away.

On June 2, Toledo called a meeting of the Acuerdo Nacional de Gobernabilidad, which includes unions, political parties, civic organizations, business and church leaders, to look for an end to the crisis. Luis Bambaren, bishop of Chimbote and former head of the Conferencia Episcopal Peruana (CEP), was named mediator in the conflict.

The following day, Interior Minister Alberto Sanabria said that as soon as the teachers called off the strike, the administration would lift the state of emergency. The same day, protesters and security forces clashed in several Peruvian cities, although thousands marched without incident in Lima in what was estimated to be the largest protest against Toledo since he took office.

In front of the Congress, protesters chanted "a teacher's salary for lawmakers," a reference to the salary of members of Peru's Congress, which is approximately US\$8,000 a month plus numerous other bonus payments.

On June 3, the government issued a "supreme decree" giving the Finance Ministry eight days to present a retooled budget to come up with funds to give teachers a raise. Finance Minister Javier Silva Ruete said the overhaul would mean across-the-board cutbacks to pay teachers.

On the evening of June 4, Bambaren and Lopez announced a 40-point agreement that could lift the strike and the state of emergency. Prime Minister Luis Solari de la Fuente said after four hours of talks that government ministers and leaders of SUTEP had reached an agreement that committed the government to double teachers' salaries by July 28, 2006, the date Toledo is due to step down. The US\$29 increase offered by Toledo will be the first step toward that.

"This is an important step, but we think there is still a part remaining. We have finished our work with the executive branch and now there is some work pending in the Congress," Lopez told a news conference after the talks. He said that some of the teacher demands would require new laws, like an option for teachers to drop out of a private pension system.

Bambaren said the preliminary accords showed that dialogue had triumphed over violence. "There were pessimists who did not believe a solution was possible. The teachers have given a lesson in how to practice a culture of dialogue," Bambaren said.

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