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## President De Lozada Fails to Stop Protests

by LADB Staff

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As the death toll continued to rise in ongoing clashes between demonstrators and security forces, embattled Bolivian President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada halted a plan to export natural gas to the US through Chile and offered new concessions.

Opposition groups said the concessions came too late. The president insisted he would not resign, but many observers said the human costs of the "gas war" had become so great that his departure seemed not a question of if but when.

Human rights groups say at least 74 people have been killed and hundreds injured in protests that initially focused on opposing a controversial plan to build a pipeline to export liquid natural gas (LNG) through Chile to the Pacific, where it would be shipped to the US and Mexico (see NotiSur, 2003-09- 26). The protests now seem more about Bolivia's poor and indigenous majority expressing decades of pent-up frustrations against the ruling class that has shown little interest in alleviating their poverty and marginalization.

### *Martial law brings more deaths*

The protests began Sept. 19, but intensified 10 days later when the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB) called an indefinite national strike. Disturbances began in El Alto on Oct. 8 with marches and roadblocks. The city, on the 4,000-meter-high plateau overlooking La Paz, has 500,000 inhabitants, mostly poor workers and Quechua and Aymara Indians. It is one of the most economically depressed areas in Bolivia and has the worst indices of sanitation, employment, and wealth disparity.

On Oct. 9, a group of miners from Huanuni, 200 km south of La Paz, blocked a highway. Police and military troops intervened to dismantle the roadblock, and two miners died. The Asamblea Permanente de Derechos Humanos de Bolivia (APDHB) said that the military had fired on the miners at close range.

Sacha Llorenti, representing the APDHB, demanded that authorities halt the crackdown on the protesting organizations and said a petition would be sent to the Public Ministry seeking the arrest and investigation of the police and soldiers who fired their guns against the demonstrators. "We are engaged in a conflict and are trying to avoid confrontation, but when there is aggression and when there are attempts to scare the population by using dynamite and blockading the roads into La Paz, we have to take action," said Interior Minister Yerko Kukuk.

On Oct. 11, the COB and the Confederacion Sindical Unica de Trabajadores Campesinos (CSUTCB) said they would further intensify the general strike and continue the struggle "underground," if the government declared a state of siege. CSUTCB leader Felipe Quispe said Sanchez de Lozada

must resign, and Quispe blamed the president for the violent repression against the demonstrators. "Senor Sanchez de Lozada is not only a North American gringo, but now he is a butcher," said Quispe. "I don't know how many more deaths the country needs for the people's problems to be addressed."

Presidential spokesperson Mauricio Antezana said on the night of Oct. 11 that the president had ordered troops into El Alto "to defend constitutional order and the state of law." Antezana also accused Deputy Evo Morales, the leader of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), of plotting a coup. Rather than restoring order, the decision to militarize El Alto made the situation significantly worse.

More than 30 people were killed during clashes on Oct. 12 and 13, and scores more were injured. The international airport in El Alto was closed and travelers and tourists were stranded.

The government decision to send out the army brought a sharp reaction from the leaders of the APDHB and the Confederacion de Trabajadores de la Prensa de Bolivia (CTPB), who had been offering to mediate talks to resolve the crisis. APDHB president Waldo Albarracin said that, instead of sending positive signals to get a negotiation underway, the authorities opted for the "opposite path" and stepped up the repression, increasing the number of victims and creating a climate of terror in El Alto. "The responsibility for the failure of a dialogue to materialize between government authorities and the most representative sectors of the popular movement falls on the government," said Albarracin in a letter to the president.

The high death toll increased the demands that Sanchez de Lozada step down. The Catholic Church and various humanitarian organizations called the actions by the security forces a massacre. Their letter to the president said, "Diverse communications media have confirmed the use of large caliber weapons, including heavy machine guns, against the Bolivian people."

COB leader Jaime Solares accused authorities of provoking the incidents that brought so many deaths. President holds out carrot The president next tried to quell the violence by offering a concession regarding the gas-export plan. "The government has decided it will not export natural gas to new markets...until consultations have been conducted [with the Bolivian people]," Sanchez de Lozada told a news conference on Oct. 13.

The presidential decree called for a consultation process that would conclude by the end of the year and would include a revision of the energy law (Ley de Hidrocarburos) and the tax code (Codigo Tributario). Of the leaders of the various groups protesting government policy, Morales was the strongest in rejecting the president's decree. He said the measure did not call for a referendum or stipulate that the consultation process would be binding.

The decree did not change anything, said Morales. Morales said that the presidential decree "is not a solution" or even a concession by the government. "There is a growing sense of insurrection," he said. "The popular movement is no longer focused on gas and other grievances, but on the figure of President Sanchez de Lozada." The situation became even more tense as new groups joined the protests and called for the president to resign.

Transport workers and bakers from La Paz said they would go out on strike, while the coca growers, led by Morales, said they would block the principal highway in the country. By this time, disturbances were also occurring in other cities around the country, including Cochabamba, Oruro, and Sucre.

In a blow to the president, Vice President Carlos Mesa said on Oct. 13 that he was withdrawing his support for the government, but would continue to be vice president. He expressed his "absolute condemnation" for the way the administration responded to the crisis. "I cannot continue to support the situation we are living," said Mesa. "I have tried to persuade the government to dialogue, but I have not been successful. The events have unfolded with a cost in human lives my conscience cannot tolerate."

Mesa's decision brought into question whether his party, the Nueva Fuerza Republicana (NFR), would split from the governing coalition. Also examining its continuation in the alliance was the Movimiento de Izquierda Republicana (MIR), as Economic Development Minister Jorge Torres Obleas of the MIR resigned.

The press reported that three other ministers had also resigned. Sanchez de Lozada remained resolute despite the escalating crisis. "I have taken very seriously the mandate the people have given me and the oath I took before God, our nation, and the sacred scriptures," he said.

Sanchez de Lozada was elected by Congress in 2002 after taking only 22% of the popular vote in the election in which Morales came in a very close second with 21%. The president charged that Quispe and Morales were plotting to drive him out of office. "Democracy cannot be replaced by a union dictatorship," the president said. "Something that the people have built cannot be destroyed to be replaced with a new authoritarianism, a new dictatorship that is going to pit region against region, class against class, ethnic group against ethnic group."

"The only way out of this crisis is a radical rethink of economic policy or the president's resignation," said Roberto Fernandez, a lawmaker from one of the coalition parties. "The situation can only get worse unless one of these steps is taken."

On Oct. 15, the president made additional concessions in a proposal that included holding a nonbinding referendum, revising the Ley de Hidrocarburos, and passing a constitutional amendment to allow a Constituent Assembly. But the offer seemed too little, too late.

Opposition leaders rejected the offer and again called for the president to resign. Solares said Sanchez de Lozada must go. "Let him not just leave the government, but Bolivia as well," said Solares. "And let him take the US ambassador with him." History of oppression underlies protests Sanchez de Lozada has faced previous violent protests by workers and indigenous leaders opposed to his free-market policies (see NotiSur, 2003-02-21).

The Bolivian president grew up in the US, speaks Spanish with an American accent, and has staked his political fortunes to a large extent on his relationship with the Bush administration. While the

catalyst for these latest demonstrations was the overwhelming public rejection of the gas-export project, it has become a lightning rod for wider discontent with Sanchez de Lozada's pro-US free-market policies and his failure to tackle endemic poverty and other social problems.

Sanchez de Lozada maintains that the revenue from the sale of gas to the US will create jobs and stabilize the Bolivian economy. He has promised that the money generated will go directly into funding for education and health care. But many Bolivians believe that foreign companies and Bolivian business and political leaders will be the only ones to benefit from the sale.

Morales recently said that he is not totally opposed to the export of natural gas, but first the country should recover its sovereignty over the deposits of hydrocarbons, in the hands of transnationals since the industry was privatized in 1997. Protesters also are demanding that, before the nation's energy resources are exported, they should be used to provide energy to poor Bolivians, many of whom still cook on wood stoves.

For many of the poor, the energy industry epitomizes strong foreign economic exploitation, an extension of the foreigners who for centuries exploited the country's silver and tin mines. The battle has now become one for the future of the country, and especially for the direction the capitalist system will take.

Playing a pivotal role are the campesino and indigenous organizations, which represent 75% of the population. And Sanchez de Lozada embodies the political and business class that has ignored them.

Donna Lee Van Cott, a Bolivia expert and political scientist at the University of Tennessee, said the protests are rooted in years of conflict fueled by poverty and social rifts. "The majority of the population, which is indigenous and poor, has been excluded economically. They are tired of waiting, and they are highly mobilized," she said.

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