Miner Blows Self Up in Congress

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A miner with dynamite strapped to his belt blew himself up in the Bolivian Congress on March 30, killing himself and two senior police officers and injuring several more. The miner, Eusatquio Picachuri, said he was seeking social security benefits, underscoring the grievances of many poor miners who have lost employment in recent years. The incident led President Carlos Mesa to set in place immediate reforms in the fund-strapped pension system, while mining spokespeople threatened further incidents of self-immolation.

Picachuri entered the Congress through a side door and shouted, "If you try to arrest me or move me, you all will die!" He fingered several sticks of dynamite jammed into his vest. "I'm not an assassin, I'm not a terrorist, but I am prepared to die." Moments later an explosion rocked the hallway, killing Picachuri and two police officers and wounding 10 others. After losing his mining job five years ago, the 47-year-old Picachuri had been working odd jobs to make ends meet for his family.

A friend of the unemployed miner, Rene Gutierrez, said he had pleaded with Picachuri "not to risk his life" before he entered the building. But Picachuri responded by saying he was tired of living in hardship, Gutierrez said. Picachuri detonated at least eight sticks of dynamite as congressional security police tried to negotiate, authorities said. "I was standing some four meters away from him," said Raul Moreno, a police officer on the scene. "He had dynamite sticks strapped all around his body a lot of them."

The blast caused extensive damage to the Congress building and killed Col. Marbel Flores, the head of the congressional security police, and Lieutenant Rene Amurrio of the same service.

One of the 10 wounded was the national director of intelligence, Col. Juan Carlos Saa, who was on the scene attempting to find an agreement for Picachuri's demands. President Mesa had been in the Congress building prior to the explosion, but left fifteen minutes earlier to attend a soccer match.

Other miners threaten suicide

Like Picachuri, thousands of poor miners in Bolivia have lost their jobs in recent years as the government privatized mines. Picachuri’s act of self-immolation brought threats from other former miners seeking state benefits. Bolivian law grants retirement benefits at age 65 or after a worker has made contributions for at least 20 years.

Picachuri, according to government officials, fell five years short of the minimum requirement, having worked in the mines for 15 years. Picachuri reportedly was demanding retirement benefits not only for himself but also to support his wife and brother. The average retirement-benefit payment is about US$125 a month.
Bolivia, the poorest country in South America, has been the site of silver, tin, and lead mining for centuries, largely by the country's poor Indian majority. Nearly all of them, however, lost their jobs in 1985, when the government embarked on a privatization program that helped to improve efficiency but cost surplus miners their livelihood.

Jobless and uneducated, many laid-off miners turned to subsistence farming, barely eking out a livelihood and struggling to support their families. Those fortunate enough to stay on at the remaining government-owned mines settled for monthly salaries of as little as US$55.

Even after the massive layoffs, Picachuri remained one of 800 state miners, but he was eventually laid off in 1995, his brother Jose said. Since then, he made ends meet working odd jobs but failing to find steady work, according to family members. He was desperate to find a full-time job to support his wife and three children who live in the remote mining town of Catavi, some 402 km south of La Paz, Jose said.

Picachuri was part of the "sandwich generation" workers who lost jobs in the successive waves of layoffs, particularly during the administration of Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997, 2002-2003), before they were qualified to collect benefits.

One union warned that 35,000 Bolivians were in the same situation as Picachuri. The head of the Association of Ex-Mine Workers, Felix Condarco, said, "We are ready to sacrifice more lives if the government doesn't change the pensions law. Many of my companions with more than twenty years in the mines are spitting up blood and demanding their rights."

**President Mesa sets emergency pension caps**

President Mesa moved to cap public pension payments at 8,000 bolivianos per month, which is slightly more than US$1,000. The cap had an exemption for former presidents and vice presidents, who receive pension payments of around 20,000 bolivianos, or almost US$2,500, but will affect all other former top officials, military chiefs, and police officers who previously had incomes above the new limit.

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The pensions system has been in a state of disrepair, lacking sufficient funds to pay the approximately US$400 million it is obligated to disburse annually. About 20,000 people, 2,000 of them miners, find themselves seeking pensions in circumstances similar to Picachuri's. Thousands of unemployed Bolivian miners are not getting retirement benefits because of a shortage of public funds and inconsistencies between the old state pension system and a private retirement scheme created in 1997.
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The pensions system will now undergo an 18-month review. The incident also led to the resignation of Evelin Grandi, director of the Servicio Nacional del Sistema de Reparto (Senasir), the national service charged with evaluating retirement-benefits requests to the state. Unions had been calling for her to step down, saying she could not be an interlocutor in negotiations and criticizing the high pensions of up to US$2,500 paid to some former state officials.

Security reinforced, negotiations criticized

Mesa called for calm after the explosion and called Picachuri’s suicide the "act of a desperate man." In Congress, officials acted to reinforce security as they rebuilt the damaged structure. Interior Minister Alfonso Ferrufino said that "threatened" state buildings and agencies were in a state of emergency, and he lamented that "one can acquire a stick of dynamite for 50 centavos of a boliviano (less than US$0.01) on the black market and an electric detonator (like the one Picachuri used) for US$0.50." Metal detectors at government buildings will be a first step in preventing more incidents like this one, reported papers in La Paz.
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