8-3-2007

Three Die in Peruvian Demonstrations Over Education Law, Infrastructure

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Three Die in Peruvian Demonstrations Over Education Law, Infrastructure

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Peru
Published: 2007-08-03

Protests across Peru resulted in multiple injuries, three deaths and hundreds of arrests in July during the largest demonstrations since President Alan Garcia came to office one year ago. Teachers conducted large-scale strikes over new legislation subjecting educators to competency tests, a requirement that union leaders said would lead to arbitrary firings. In regions across Peru there were also demonstrations calling for greater investment in infrastructure and aid to poor farmers.

The strikes also led to a conflict between regional and federal powers, as the president made a decree prohibiting regional leaders from taking part in strikes. The strikes highlighted Garcia's severe drop in popularity as significant economic growth fails to reach large sectors of Peruvian society, even as inflation does.

Teachers strike against education reform law

On July 19, Peru's public school teachers ended a 15-day strike against a new law requiring them to take competency tests after government officials agreed to talks on their demand for better training. The Sindicato Unitario de Trabajadores de la Educacion Peruana (SUTEP), a militant union often criticized by the government (see NotiSur, 2003-06-06 and 2004-10-15), called the strike. Cabinet chief Jorge del Castillo said the teachers would return to work on July 20.

About 15% of Peru's 350,000 teachers walked off the job July 5 to protest the Ley de Carrera Publica Magisterial reform under which they would be fired if they fail a competency test three times, the Education Ministry said. The teachers' union had said the law would lead to "arbitrary" firings. The Lima daily newspaper La Republica said on July 19 that 72% of teachers took part in the strike, attributing the figures to the Oficina de Coordinacion y Supervision Regional (OCSR) of the Ministry of Education.

February tests showed almost half of the teachers could not solve basic math problems and one-third were deficient in reading comprehension. Earlier on July 19, officials closed the Cuzco airport after 200 teachers set fire to the facility's grassy border, forcing the cancellation of 13 flights and stranding thousands of travelers at the height of the tourist season, Katty Mora, an airport security department employee, told The Associated Press.

About 2,000 teachers had marched near the airport. The teachers' strike coincided with a nine-day protest by farmers demanding lower seed prices, which ended on the same day.

Fears for tourism

During the protests, major roads were blockaded in interior provinces, and in Cuzco, rail travel to Machu Picchu - the country's top tourist destination - was temporarily suspended after protesters threw rocks at the cars, damaging the tracks.
The Lima daily newspaper El Comercio editors opined on July 19 that "sabotage against tourism should neither be forgiven nor tolerated," lamenting US Department of State warnings to US citizens visiting Peru. The paper called for "a strategy of immediate help for those tourists [who had missed flights because of protests] in a way that minimizes the damages and bad image" protests had allegedly brought about. The business-oriented paper called on police and courts to act "severely" against those "whose archaic thinking appears to only desire to bring us to collective suicide."

In March, Peru's Congress passed a new law stiffening penalties for attacks on tourists, making the maximum sentence for murdering or severely injuring a tourist life in prison. The law, which applies to both Peruvian and foreign tourists, was approved in a unanimous vote in Congress. Previously, only crimes such as terrorism or rape of a minor carried a life sentence in Peru. The law also established a maximum prison sentence of 25 years for physical assault on a tourist or drugging a tourist during a robbery. Robberies of tourists are common in Peru.

In November 2005, police began patrolling Peru's famed Inca Trail, which leads to the country's top tourist destination, Machu Picchu, following an armed robbery of 13 tourists. The people the El Comercio editors criticized included laborers, transport drivers, affiliates of the Confederacion General de Trabajadores del Peru (CGTP) and other unions who blocked roads. In Arequipa, the main organizing body that negotiated with the government was called Frente Amplio Cívico de Arequipa (FACA).

On July 10 in the southern department of Apurimac, a 13-year-old girl died after a log protesters had thrown struck her in the head. The next day in Satipo, Junin, a man died from bullet wounds during street confrontations. An indigenous representative died of bullet wounds at protests in the outskirts of the southeastern city of Andahuaylas and at least nine others were wounded on July 16 during confrontations with police. Some reports stated that more than two dozen protestors were injured.

At least one thousand indigenous people had been cutting off the highway to the city with demands for protection of campesinos, reduction of seed prices and other products for agricultural production. As of July 17, police had arrested about 300 people since the beginning of protests. Police said they would prosecute individuals who injured police in the protests as supporters of the revolutionary group Sendero Luminoso.

Not all teachers observed the "truce" that SUTEP leaders and the government had reached. On July 27, classrooms in the southeastern department of Puno remained empty as teachers decided to remain in protest against the Ley de Carrera Publica Magisterial. Union leaders there argued that the law was unconstitutional and maintained their strike, which had lasted more than a month at that point.

Conflict between regional, federal powers
 Earlier in the year, the government declared a state of emergency in provinces of Andahuaylas and Apurimac following protests. As regional presidents joined the strikes, Garcia issued legislative decree number 982, which said those authorities would be sanctioned and removed from their posts.
if they joined strikes. "The state cannot strike against the state," said Garcia. "Officials who want to strike should give up their posts."

Regional leaders decried the measure as "authoritarian," "repressive," and "anti-constitutional," saying it was reminiscent of measures by ex-President Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000). Regional presidents from Ancash, Apurimac, Arequipa, Cajamarca, Cuzco, Huanuco, Ica, Lambayeque, Loreto, Moquegua, Puno, Tacna and Ucayali rejected the decree.

As the regional leaders called for more investment in infrastructure, Garcia responded that the central government had already delivered 11.6 billion soles (about US$3.7 billion) to the regions. "The people already know who to ask for public works," said Garcia, alluding that local mismanagement had wasted the budget allocations.

Garcia called on police and the armed forces to be careful in their responses to protests, saying he would call for the strictest penalties for those who caused injuries or death "in the line of duty." He denied claims that police had "a license to kill," and said that "courts and prosecutors have the right and the duty to verify that arms were used in a manner that was legal, according to regulations, and in fulfillment of institutional duties [of police and soldiers]." Regional president of Pasco, Felix Rivera, said that Garcia's decrees against police who killed were inadequate and "now they are giving a blank check for slaughters"