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LADB Staff

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Rural Residents Demand Withdrawal of Security Forces

by LADB Staff

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Since early January, the government of President Virgilio Barcos has been the target of relentless complaints and demands from throughout rural Colombia. Farmer and rural workers' organizations have staged massive mobilizations, often occupying public schools, parks and streets in selected towns and cities for days or weeks at a time. Their principal demands directed at the national government are "demilitarization" of rural areas, i.e., withdrawal of military personnel; additional financial resources dedicated to the expansion of economic infrastructure (roadways, bridges, electricity, telephone, storage facilities for agricultural products, etc.), and social welfare spending (education and health services). On occasion, demands by rural organizations have converged with those of industrial workers. Examples here involve calling on Bogota to remove military forces from rural areas and curb the actions of paramilitary groups accused of murder and harassment affecting workers in enterprises ranging from banana cultivation to oil refining and exploration.

In the following, recent events in this on-going and generalized wave of protest are summarized.

May 22: Over 15,000 rural residents of northern and eastern Antioquia department continued occupying the town of Remedios and other municipal seats in the area. Organizers of the occupation which began on May 18, said they had delivered demands to the Barcos administration for removal of army personnel as a crucial step toward curbing the wave of violence affecting the region. In addition, demands for implementation of an "economic recovery program" had been presented in Bogota, consisting of highway construction, and the installation of several new health clinics and schools.

Organizers told reporters the occupation would continue until presidential mediator, Carlos Ossa, traveled to the region to hear their demands and ensure that measures would be taken to meet them. Several leaders of labor and civic organizations have reportedly been killed in clashes with the army and paramilitary groups in northern Antioquia. May 26: 200,000 residents of the Pacific coastal department of Choco staged street demonstrations against what they called the national government's disregard for their economic and social welfare, and its failure to act against paramilitary groups terrorizing indigenous communities. Demonstrations reportedly occurred throughout the department's 19 municipalities, and in the department capital, Quibdo. In petitions forwarded to President Barco, strike organizers declared that Choco, inhabited mainly by descendants of African slaves, is characterized by substandard public services of all kinds, including communications, health care facilities and education.

According to independent and official statistics cited by strike organizers, Choco is among the country's most backward departments in all areas, despite its considerable natural wealth, primarily gold and timber. Local media reports indicated that all schools were closed, and commerce and transport activities throughout the department were paralyzed. June 1: Thousands of rural residents occupied public schools and parks in the town of Caucasia in northern Antioquia department, and Barrancabermeja in Santander department.

Spokespersons said they are demanding the withdrawal of army personnel from areas in which they live and work, and increased government spending, particularly in the areas of education and health services. June 3: Peasant and rural labor organizations in Narino announced a 24-hour strike, scheduled to begin June 4 and affecting the department's 56 municipalities. Narino, a southern coastal department, borders on Ecuador; most workers are engaged in agricultural and fisheries activities.

Strike organizers reported that 900,000 people would participate in the action focused on obtaining spending commitments from Bogota in the areas of rural development, transportation and communications, education and health care. They told reporters that if the national government fails to respond to their demands, the strike could continue indefinitely. Occupations in Antioquia and Santander departments continued.

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