

Five days in Ecuador general strike

By Gerardo Nebbia
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A major social and political explosion is taking place in the South American country of Ecuador, where a nationwide transport strike against the government of President Jamil Mahuad has come together with mass protests by impoverished Indian peasants in the Andean highlands. What follows is a day-by-day account of the crisis over the past week.

July 12: Monday was the ninth day of a national transportation strike. So far it has paralyzed the major cities of Ecuador. Markets are empty and there is no fuel. This morning the police arrested two of the strike leaders: Luis Villacis, leader of the Popular Front, and Ivan Narvaez, president of the Petroleum Workers Federation. Nelson Chavez, president of the Heavy Transport Federation, denounced the government: "The government does not care what happens to the country. The country is on fire and we want to put the fire out." On Monday, 50,000 banana workers joined the strike.

Indian organizations are also part of the strike. They gave the government an ultimatum: lower the 13.5 percent fuel tax or thousands of Indians would march on Quito. Already the Indians have blocked several key highways. Indians also took the drinking water installation in Ambato, leaving Quito without water.

July 13: On Tuesday, Congress, hoping to kick-start stalled negotiations, lifted the state of emergency that had been imposed last week by President Jamil Mahuad. The emergency had given the president a 60-day period during which it could use the army to impose order. So far 378 strikers have been arrested. Around Quito, striking taxi drivers were organizing collections from motorists in the few vehicles still circulating. Quito's main streets have been barricaded with tires, old vehicles and rocks.

Thousands of Indians have started toward Quito. "This Jamil has driven us into poverty with his policies. We hope that the government will come to its senses, instead of waiting for more social chaos," said Jose

Chuspin, an Indian marcher. The last social crisis involving mass mobilizations and strikes took place in 1997 and ended with removal of then President Abdala Bucaram.

July 14: On Wednesday soldiers shot and killed a striking transport worker in the southern province of El Oro. The Banana Workers Union, whose members joined the strike on Monday, denounced the death. So far, the police and the army have arrested over 400 strikers. About 20 have been shot and wounded.

Indians are approaching Quito from the north and south. A group of protesters have also taken over the Ecuadorian Episcopal Conference.

Small businessmen rallied in front of Congress, demanding that President Jamil Mahuad resign. Amid rumors of a possible military coup, congress began discussing the possible removal of President Mahuad.

July 15: On Thursday, as between 10,000 and 15,000 Indians were entering Quito, President Mahuad announced the suspension of the tax and froze the price of fuel. Even though the Indians had announced that theirs was a totally peaceful march, about 5,000 Indian women marchers were brutally attacked by the army. Scores of Indian women, children and elderly suffered from exposure to tear gas. The military tried unsuccessfully to prevent the Indians from entering the city. There are reports that Quito's population sided with the Indian marchers, and helped them to enter the city.

Determined to stop the Indians, the Mahuad government ordered a battalion of troops and six tanks to "defend" the presidential palace. While Indians were entering Quito, others took the television and radio antennae on the hills surrounding the city. Indian protesters said that television hides the actual state of society, the protests and the hunger, making it seem that there is relative tranquillity in the country.

Strikers ceased their occupation of the Episcopal

Conference. However, many of the transport workers worried that the suspension would only be temporary, to defuse popular anger. They asked instead that there be a one-year freeze on fuel prices.

July 16: The Ecuadorian congress approved amnesty for the more than 500 strikers arrested during the week of protests against President Mahuad. Indians and strikers began to plan rallies at the prisons to receive the strikers.

The demand for freedom for the jailed strikers was a key demand of transport workers and Indians alike. Following the release of the strikers and the cancellation of the fuel tax, the transport workers lifted their strike. However, other social groups vowed to continue protesting until the government changes its economic policies.

President Mahuad is negotiating a \$400 million loan from the International Monetary Fund, in exchange for policies of fiscal austerity. Paradoxically, Mahuad hopes that the loan will restore confidence and reactivate the economy. The government is also proposing an Argentine-style currency board to rigidly peg the sucre to the dollar. Such a board would impose rigid financial discipline, including very high interest rates and a deeper recession. Ecuador's economy is expected to shrink by 5 percent this year.

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