

Romanian miners' protest ends

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Romanian Prime Minister Radu Vasile announced an agreement Friday with protesting coal miners marching on Bucharest to press their demands for wage increases and the reopening of closed pits. Earlier in the week between 7,000 and 10,000 demonstrators armed with Molotov cocktails, clubs and shovels clashed with riot police and special interior ministry forces and twice broke through concrete-reinforced barricades to continue their march. The striking miners had marched nearly 100 miles from the central Jiu Valley coal region and were within 110 miles of the capital when the deal was struck.

"The miners' action has stopped," Vasile later told private ProTV. "They are now getting into their buses and going home." Details of the agreement were unclear. But Vasile told journalists, gathered outside the monastery where four hours of talks with miners leader Miron Cozma took place, that "technical and economic solutions had been found to solve the miners' difficult problems. The situation has been resolved." Vasile and Cozma were set to meet thousands of miners occupying the center of the nearby town of Rimnicu Vilcea, to reveal the terms of the settlement.

Vasile had earlier ordered the miners to return to work and give up their "absurd demands." In a televised broadcast the prime minister said, "The credibility and the future of Romania is at stake. We cannot accept force or blackmail." Vasile said the government's foreign debt commitments made it impossible to to meet the miners' demands for a 35 percent wage increase and the reopening of two closed mines in the Jiu Valley.

Despite a ruling that their two-week strike was illegal the miners pressed on. On Thursday riot police using tear gas repulsed the first attempt to break their second blockade. But the miners, dividing into almost military formations, managed to work their way around the blockade, and rained rocks on the security forces from

the surrounding hills. More than 100 police were injured and some temporarily taken prisoner.

President Emil Constantinescu then threatened to establish martial law and unleash military forces if the miners did not stop their march. Thousands of police with armored reinforcements were reportedly concentrating to stop the marchers. However, with the miners prepared to defy martial law and government concern that a bloody confrontation would provoke wider social unrest, Constantinescu decided to let his deadline pass and give Vasile more time to work out an agreement with the miners' leaders.

The miners' determination and the popular support they received during the five-day march shocked authorities. In addition to their demands for wage increases and the reopening of the mines many workers began to demand the resignation of the government. Vasile was forced to fire his Interior Minister Gavril Dejeu, and his replacement, Constantin Dudu Ionescu, in turn fired both the head of the police force responsible for maintaining public order and the general who led security forces in the two failed attempts to contain the miners. "We are in exceptional circumstances in which the existence of the state itself is in question," Ionescu declared.

The Romanian government is under pressure from the IMF and World Bank to restructure the economy and close down a large portion of its unprofitable industries, including mining. Vasile's austerity plan, worked out in exchange for IMF funding, involves closing 140 coal mines. Western financial institutions have been impatient with the pace of economic restructuring, first carried out by Ion Iliescu, the Stalinist successor of the ousted dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, and then by more right-wing governments. The economy has continued to shrink at the rate of 5 to 8 percent a year, and the government is now trying to avoid defaulting on its debts.

Shortly after the 1990 elections Iliescu and his ex-Stalinist supporters, exploiting the fears and hostility of the working class and peasantry over the conditions created by the restoration of capitalism, summoned coal miners onto the streets of Bucharest to counter demonstrations led by right-wing forces. In 1992 the miners returned and besieged the capital, protesting deteriorating economic conditions and forcing the ouster of Prime Minister Petre Roman. In 1993 miners union leader Miron Cozma called off a strike by 45,000 workers, and sabotaged a growing strike wave of workers against Iliescu, who, despite his attempts to manipulate the working class, had carried through the privatization of the majority of the economy.



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