

Nigeria's fuel protests gather support

Our correspondent
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Workers and students in Nigeria took to the streets on March 20, at the start of a nation-wide protest against a rise in petrol prices. Several thousand protesters marched through the northern Nigerian city of Kano to the residence of its Governor, Musa Kwankwaso, to denounce President Olusegun Obasanjo's plan to deregulate petrol prices.

Anti-riot police deployed armoured cars in an attempt to intimidate the demonstrators. "Police positioned a tank in front of the Governor's residence and there were more than 10 patrol vehicles stationed nearby," said a witness in Kano. Demonstrators torched the gubernatorial residence last year during similar protests, triggered by Obasanjo's decision to hike gasoline prices by 50 percent.

The weeklong campaign began in some of Nigeria's 36 states one day prior to a major rally planned in the commercial capital Lagos. Tuesday's protest in Kano passed peacefully, despite being tailed by police in armoured cars. "We did not vote for Obasanjo to deregulate fuel prices," said a large placard carried by the demonstrators.

The trade unions are attempting to turn the campaign into a protest against the smuggling of oil products into neighbouring states, rather than against deregulation per se. A trade union official leading the campaign said, "Our problem is not deregulation. Government has done nothing to put an end to illegal diversion of petroleum products by privileged citizens."

A year ago, a general strike against an attempt to raise prices by 50 percent forced the government into a partial retreat. Earlier this week, Obasanjo addressed a graduation ceremony at the Nigerian Defence Academy in northern Kaduna; referring to the fuel protest he said that subsidies made no economic sense and that deregulation "was a matter of when, not if".

The government says deregulation and ending subsidies are necessary to end long-running fuel

shortages, blamed largely on inefficient and run down domestic refineries.

Obasanjo aims at the complete deregulation of Nigeria's fuel sector, ending the government monopoly on refining and importing fuel, and gradually lifting the subsidies that currently give Nigerians some of the cheapest petrol in the world. The government says that until this is done, chronic petrol shortages will continue because distributors will always be tempted to sell petrol on the black market or smuggle it abroad.

The authorities have tried to frighten ordinary Nigerians with warnings of looming chaos if the protests go ahead at a time when tension and disenchantment are spreading across the country of over 110 million people because of a worsening energy crisis.

The unions have come to the head of the protests, arguing that deregulation of fuel prices will drive up costs elsewhere, damaging the economy. In Katsina town, 3,000 people packed an anti-deregulation rally in the business district. Police cordoned off the area and shops were closed. "The government should understand that Nigerians have been living under excruciating poverty and with non-functioning infrastructure," Nigeria Labour Congress Katsina chairman, Umaru Mohammed Bokari, told the cheering crowd.

In an effort to prevent the protests spreading, the government has asked for talks with union leaders in the capital, Abuja, scheduled for today or tomorrow.

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