

Bolivia: Military-provoked riots end in 33 deaths

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Fifteen thousand people marched on La Paz, February 17, demanding the resignation of the Bolivian government of President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada. The demonstration came in the wake of more than a month of protests, strikes, roadblocks and violent clashes that have rocked Latin America's poorest nation.

A stream of farmers, teachers, students and workers poured into Plaza San Francisco shouting anti-government slogans and decrying last week's military-provoked riots: "The president must resign!" "Out with the IMF (International Monetary Fund)!" "Long live the Bolivian worker!" Monday's march coincided with a 48-hour nationwide general strike called by the Bolivian Labour Federation, the COB.

Friday, Saturday and Sunday were marked by marches to mourn the dead. Thirty-three people were killed and hundreds injured over the past week in the worst confrontations since the return to civilian rule two decades ago. Casualties consisted mainly of unarmed civilians caught in the crossfire between mutinying police and the military called out by the right-wing government of Sanchez de Lozada.

When government representatives arrived at the funeral procession, the crowd started shoving them, jeering "Murderers! Murderers!"

The US was one of the few governments to voice support for Sanchez de Lozada, who like Peru's Alejandro Toledo and Colombia's Alvaro Uribe is closely aligned to the Bush administration's anti-drug and anti-terror war in Latin America.

"We reiterate our support for President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada and the coalition government," said Richard Boucher, US State Department spokesman. "Together with our partners in the international community and the relevant international financial

institutions, the United States supports the goals of the government of Bolivia to restore economic stability, continue on a democratic path and provide hope for a better life to the Bolivian people."

The protests, which began in La Paz on February 11, were sparked by the introduction of a budget bill that proposed to increase personal income taxes on the poor and middle class and cut spending by as much as 10 percent. In line with an IMF-dictated agenda, the government aimed to reduce the nation's deficit from 8.6 percent to 5.5 percent in order to secure \$4 billion in new credits.

The protests turned bloody when police from the anti-riot squad refused to begin patrols, demanding a 40 percent pay increase and the scrapping of the proposed income tax bill.

"Government employees, largely the only workers who have regular, taxable salaries, stormed the square outside the presidential palace and broke into government offices," wrote Britain's *Observer* newspaper. "The carnage began in earnest after Sanchez de Lozada gave orders to send in the army.... Television footage showed soldiers firing at the police headquarters across the square after police officers fired tear gas at them."

Even though the government ditched the tax bill and reached an accord with the police, the popular movement spread by February 13 to Bolivia's second and third largest cities of Santa Cruz and Cochabamba—with protesters demanding Sanchez de Lozada "resign or die, those are your options."

In Cochabamba, one coca farmer was killed when military police moved in to block peasants erecting barricades across the country's major highway connecting the city with La Paz and Santa Cruz. In another incident half a dozen police were wounded

when an explosive was detonated on the highway.

Government officials claimed the protests had veiled a “failed coup attempt against democracy.” Mauricio Antezana, spokesman for the administration, said snipers that had allegedly fired into the president’s office were part of a conspiracy to overthrow the government.

Sanchez de Lozada seized on the occasion to shift the blame for the riots onto the MAS and attempted to link them to terrorist extremists.

On February 14 Defence Minister Freddy Teodovic boldly asserted that “extremists linked to the MAS were moving to create problems for the government and generate a climate of uncertainty and chaos” throughout the country.

Officials then retreated, saying that the riots and the killings were the work of “unidentified” sources, partly because human rights groups have pressed on the Organisation of American States to conduct an investigation.

Human rights groups have attributed responsibility for the firing squad-style killings in La Paz last week to military sharpshooters, seen firing off rooftops.

Associated Press reported one 27-year-old volunteer firefighter shot in the eye by soldiers as he was helping an injured police officer into an ambulance.

In a court hearing a witness identified an air force captain—arrested on the outskirts of the presidential palace—as one of the snipers who fired into the crowd. The local media reported that another sniper in military fatigues and posted on a building near the presidential palace had killed a nurse and wounded a doctor tending wounded protesters.

The military was out in full force, with armoured vehicles and hundreds of soldiers fanning out over at least three blocks. Tanks blocked every side street leading to the presidential palace. In contrast civilian protesters hurled stones and other rudimentary weapons against the soldiers armed with rubber bullets and live ammunition.

The provocative military actions that triggered the riots reeked of premeditation and the deliberate sowing of as much mayhem as possible to justify the imposition of a state of siege.

This would not have been the first time that the present president imposed emergency rule. The US-educated Sanchez de Lozada called on the military to

“restore order” during his last stint as president from 1993-1997, when he confronted weeks of protests against the privatisation of state-owned industries and mass layoffs.

Today, the right-wing Bolivian government is once again relying on the military to counter mass opposition to the austerity measures being demanded by the imperialist banks and financial institutions.

According to the London-based think tank *World Markets Research Centre*, to claim the \$4 billion requested from the IMF, Sanchez de Lozada must implement similar policies to those that led to the rioting last week. Although he has pledged to cut costs to the tune of \$30 million by reducing posts and functionaries in the executive branch, this falls well below the \$200 million he will need to slash from the deficit to receive assistance.

“When he is forced to implement more general spending cuts, his government is likely to face further strikes and protests. If these lead to doubts as to whether the ruling coalition, which was shaky from the outset, can hold, then the viability of the government could be called into question,” the research group concluded.



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