

Striking farmers cut access to Peru's Machu Picchu

Reuters
February 19, 2008

LIMA - Peruvian farmers upset over a free trade deal with the United States blocked rail service to the famous Inca ruins at Machu Picchu and closed key highways on Monday, prompting the government to say it may deploy the army to end the strike.

The protests temporarily stranded thousands of travelers in the Andean nation, including some 400 people stuck on the train to the ancient Incan citadel, Peru's top tourist attraction.

The Pan-American highway, the major road on the Peruvian coast, was blocked north and south of the capital, Lima, travelers and police said. Farmers nationwide snarled traffic with tree trunks, rocks and sand.

"The government only listens to us when we strike," said Antolin Huascar, the head of a national farmers' group. He said farmers would protest until the government agrees to meet with them about their demands.

Police were able to reopen portions of some routes late on Monday, but travelers complained of violence at the hands of rock-throwing protesters. At least one person died, the government said.

"The government demands the protest be ended and roads be opened without having to resort to military force," Jorge del Castillo, President Alan Garcia's cabinet chief, told reporters. "The army and the police will act immediately if necessary."

Farmers are frustrated by rising fertilizer costs, want debt relief, and say a free trade deal with the United States will flood local markets with imports of subsidized U.S. agricultural goods.

Peru signed the free-trade agreement in December and plans to strike similar deals with China, Canada and Mexico soon.

Peru exports grapes and asparagus to the United States, and the government says the trade pact will give local farmers permanent access to the U.S. market.

President Garcia is pushing free trade as a way to lift incomes in a country where some 12 million people live in poverty. Peru is one of the world's fastest-growing economies, expanding nearly 9 percent last year.

The South American country is a leading minerals exporter and most mines rely on railroads to get their metals to ports on the Pacific Ocean.