

# **Ecuador Quells Indian Trade Protest**

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**By Jeanneth Valdiviso**

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Police fired tear gas at dozens of Indian demonstrators trying to reach the government palace Monday to protest free-trade talks with Washington this week that are expected to draw thousands of opponents to the capital.

The debate over the talks has already led to the resignation of Ecuador's interior minister, who stepped down after making comments that appeared to support the Indians' demands.

The left-leaning Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, Ecuador's main Indian movement, blockaded roads in 11 provinces with burning tires, rocks and tree trunks last week, tying up traffic and halting commerce across the highlands and much of the eastern jungle for several days.

Luis Macas, leader of the movement, said Monday that the protests would continue unless the government abandons a final round of negotiations - scheduled to start on Thursday - and puts the free trade pact to a national referendum.

The Indian movement has threatened a "takeover" of the capital to press its demands.

Cesar Umajinga, the Indian governor of the highland Cotopaxi province, said Monday that "some 7,000 comrades" from his region planned to head to Quito in the coming hours.

The Indian confederation accuses the United States of exercising too much influence in the region and contends that Ecuadorean farmers and small-scale Indian producers cannot compete with inexpensive U.S. agricultural imports.

President Alfredo Palacio's government, however, has strongly supported the free-trade agreement. Colombia and Peru have already signed similar agreements.

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