

Ecuadoran Government Declares State of Emergency

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QUITO, Ecuador - The Ecuadorean government declared a state of emergency in four provinces on Tuesday to curb nine days of Indian protests against a proposed free-trade deal with the United States.

Television images on Tuesday showed riot police trying to clear rocks, tree trunks and burning tires from roadways north and south of Quito - in the Imbabura and Cotopaxi provinces - and firing tear gas to repel dozens of Indians, who responded by hurling stones. No serious injuries or arrests were immediately reported.

The state of emergency lifts constitutional rights to public assembly and gives police and the military broad powers to make arrests.

President Alfredo Palacio imposed the measure ``to guarantee the free flow of goods and persons (and) permit citizens the right to work," said Interior Minister Felipe Vega. ``We must find a way through this difficult situation we find ourselves in."

Roadblocks were paralyzing traffic and commerce in the southern highland Chimborazo province. There, some 10,000 people opposed to the Indian protests marched peacefully in the provincial capital city of Riobamba, 100 miles south of Quito, demanding the government stop the roadblocks, local media reported.

Police said they were determined to prevent a threatened ``takeover" of the capital by the left-leaning Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, the nation's largest Indian movement. As of late Tuesday, only 200 Indian protesters had arrived in Quito, camped out in a city park.

The state of emergency applies to the provinces of Chimborazo, Cotopaxi, Imbabura and Canar, as well as the towns of Tabacundo and Cayambe.

The blockades began March 13 when several thousand Indians across the highlands and parts of Ecuador's eastern jungle demanded that Palacio pull Ecuador's trade negotiators out of Washington and threatened to oust him from office if he signs a free-trade pact with the United States.

The Indigenous movement's political party, Pachakutik, has softened that position slightly - party coordinator Humberto Talagua said Tuesday, ``We don't want to overthrow any government."

But he warned that Palacio was setting himself up for a fall from power by insisting on the free trade deal. ``The majority of the Ecuadorean people are with us. We're going to see that in the streets," Talagua told Radio Centro.

The Indians contend that Ecuadorean farmers and small-scale Indian producers would not be able to compete with cheap imports from the U.S., where agriculture is heavily subsidized. Colombia and Peru already have signed trade deals with Washington, and Ecuador is scheduled to enter a final round of talks on Thursday.