

Protesters Storm Legislature to Halt Free-Trade Vote

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GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala (AP) -- Authorities said late Tuesday they were prepared to send troops into the streets of the Guatemalan capital, after nearly 1,000 protesters prevented lawmakers from voting on a pending free-trade agreement between Central America and the United States.

Demonstrators blocked the legislature for hours, delaying a session during which some lawmakers wanted to put the free-trade pact to a vote.

Col. Wilfred Estrada, a spokesman for the army, said he received an order from the security detail in charge of protecting the president to ready 500 soldiers and military police who would be deployed if a new round of protests erupted Wednesday or Thursday.

Interior Secretary Carlos Vielmann told The Associated Press that the country's national police force was in charge of responding to protesters, but said that "should they falter ... they would have some small support from" military forces.

No one was hurt or arrested during Tuesday's protests, but legislators unable to make it to their offices were forced to spend most of the day in auxiliary buildings nearby.

"There aren't enough lawmakers for quorum and when some who want to enter the building get close, they aren't allowed to," said Mariano Rayo, a congressman who got to the legislature early but then was prevented from leaving.

Other lawmakers wanting to leave the legislature successfully made it to the street, only to be chased for blocks by protesters.

Demonstrators eventually dispersed, allowing the legislative session to begin Tuesday night. Lawmakers quickly passed a resolution pledging to compensate those who could be hurt by the ratification of the free-trade agreement.

Protesters had promised even larger demonstrations on Thursday and Friday but it was unclear whether the proposal approved late Tuesday -- and the army's plan to deploy troops -- would alter those plans.

They are demanding that the agreement be put to a public referendum and oppose passage of a law that would grant concessions to private companies for infrastructure construction projects, saying it was a maneuver aimed at privatizing public services.

The United States signed the free-trade agreement, known as CAFTA, last May with Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. The Dominican Republic signed later.

CAFTA also sparked a wave of smaller, more orderly protests in neighboring Honduras on Tuesday, where demonstrators briefly blocked roads.

Guatemalan President Oscar Berger, whose party has been a chief supporter of the agreement, has ruled out holding a public referendum.

CAFTA also faces a tough road ahead in the United States.

President George W. Bush says the accord would open new markets for U.S. goods and services while encouraging economic and democratic reforms in Central America, but he didn't have the votes in Congress in 2004. He may not have support this year either because of competition fears among U.S. sugar and textile producers.