

COSTA RICA: Protests Bring Country to the Verge of Paralysis

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SAN JOSE, Aug 25 (IPS) - Nationwide protests in Costa Rica that started out with blockades of roads and freeways by truck drivers and which expanded Wednesday to include a broad range of groups threaten to paralyse this Central American country.

Isolated protest measures at strategic points around the country organised by truck drivers known here as "traileros" began Monday, to demand that the government put an end to the three-year monopoly by Riteve, the Spain-based company contracted to conduct the mandatory technical inspections of all Costa Rican vehicles.

But the conflict has grown and spread, and the protest by the truck drivers' union and the Chamber of Transport turned into a springboard for organisations voicing a wide range of political, economic and social grievances.

The government of Abel Pacheco is now facing demands from farmers, public employees, high school teachers and social organisations, all of which have declared a strike against the approval of a free trade treaty with the United States and anti-inflationary measures.

The organisations that have joined the protest include the National Civic Committee umbrella group, the Union of Small and Medium Farmers, the National Association of Public Employees (ANEP), and the Internal Front of Workers of the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE), the state-owned power and telecoms company.

"The government and citizens are walking through a minefield. By some miracle we have not stepped on any of those mines, which would make the country blow up," sociologist Francisco Escobar, a former director of the doctoral programme at the Costa Rica-based Autonomous University of Central America, told IPS.

In the early hours of Wednesday morning, the government called out the police to break up protests in the city of Alto de Ochomogo, in the central province of Cartago, 20 km east of the capital, and in the eastern province of Limón, on the Atlantic coast.

But the unrest continued in the north, south and central regions of this normally peaceful country of 4.2 million, which has no army and is known for its strong tradition of democratic and economic stability and its record of high achievement in education, health and social security.

Sixty demonstrators were arrested by the police and remained in jail by Wednesday afternoon. As the hours went by, new groups in different parts of the country continued to join the demonstrations, each with its own specific grievances and demands.

Negotiations between the government and the National Civic Committee, brokered by the Catholic Church and the ombudsman's office, went nowhere and were suspended.

Marjorie Lizano, president of the Chamber of Transport, issued a new call to engage in talks, but tempers flared after the early Wednesday police crackdown on demonstrators in the provinces of Cartago and Limón.

Edgar Brenes, assistant secretary of ANEP, told IPS that in a Wednesday morning meeting, several organisations decided to join the protests, including the Union of Employees of Costa Rica's Social Security Institute (UNDECA), ICE employees, and students from the state University of Costa Rica and the Technological Institute.

Protests are planned for Thursday in several regions, and a "massive march" will end at the presidential palace in San José to demand that the government put an end to the Riteve monopoly and that it pull the country out of the proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), said Brenes.

The U.S. government has already reached agreement on CAFTA with Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, but the accord is pending parliamentary approval in the participating countries.

"It's time for President Pacheco to pay attention to the widespread discontent among the Costa Rican people, who are opposed to the neo-liberal (free market) measures applied to the economy by a group of people who govern the country as a parallel" power structure, said the trade unionist.

"Many Costa Ricans already have to give up products like milk in order to pay their electricity bill," due to the high cost of living, he added.

"The government gave public employees a raise of 5.4 percent, while inflation currently stands at 7.7 percent and we'll end the year with an inflation rate that could climb as high as 13 percent. The people can't take any more, and the government has to understand that," said Brenes.

One of the biggest challenges posed by the unrest is the diversity of demands, said Escobar.

"Nobody even knows what the protests are fighting for any more, because each group is expressing its own complaints," he said. "Not even the government itself understands what is the main point of debate."

But he added that "The people are taking to the streets because of the lack of representativity they perceive in Congress, where the lawmakers do not represent their interests but those of the groups in power."

The roots of the unrest that began to crystallise on Monday have been growing over the past 20 years in response to factors like the incapacity of the political class to resolve specific problems on the health, education and economic fronts, said the analyst.

”People who have ties with the politicians are named to technical posts, rather than those who are qualified to come up with solutions to the day-to-day problems faced by Costa Ricans,” he said.

The reaction by the movement headed by the National Civic Committee can only be compared to the nationwide roadblocks and protests that broke out in April 2000 against a set of draft laws aimed at the privatisation of the government power and telecoms company, known as the ”Combo del ICE”.

The privatisation plans ended up being cancelled.

But on that occasion, the social unrest had a single, clear focus.

”There's been an accumulation” of tension, said Escobar. ”The problems have taken on enormous magnitude, which not even the government, or anybody else for that matter, can measure.”

Meanwhile, fears of shortages caused by the transport strike are growing. On Tuesday, long lines began to form at gas stations, some of which were forced to close their doors when they ran out of fuel, due to the high level of demand.

The worst thing for the government is that ”the entire nation and every aspect of activity is involved,” which is an ”excellent strategy” by the organisers of the strike, said Escobar.

”It reminds me a lot of the context seen in the 1940s, which culminated in the civil war of 1948” that lasted only a few weeks and was unleashed when that year's elections were annulled, he added.

The biggest problem today is that ”many people are armed. Many of the guns that went missing after the war in Nicaragua (in the 1980s) are now in Costa Rica, because thousands of Nicaraguan (immigrants) are working as police officers in this country,” said Escobar.

If, due to error or a misguided strategy, the police start shooting at one of the roadblocks, the country could find itself caught up in ”a bloodbath, with terrible consequences,” he warned.
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