

Panama unions clash with police over shooting death

By Andrew Beatty

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PANAMA CITY - Panamanian construction workers clashed with police on Wednesday, and nearly 200 people were arrested, after the fatal shooting of a labor leader inflamed tensions over building site safety concerns.

Officials said 193 people were arrested and 10 police officers injured in clashes across the capital, after a worker was shot dead during a protest on Tuesday.

A construction boom has boosted Panama's economy and created a shimmering skyline in Panama City, but members of the SUNTRACS construction workers union have taken to the streets in recent months to protest what they say are lax safety standards at the city's many building sites.

On Wednesday, hundreds of carpenters and brick masons took to the streets. Many hurled rocks at police, who fired tear gas canisters and doused the protesters with water cannons.

Police carried injured officers away from the melee as piles of tires burned in the streets.

The union says police shot dead Airomi Smith, a union leader, in the province of Colon during a confrontation with workers on Tuesday. Images of the incident broadcast on local television showed a police officer shooting his weapon after a scuffle with workers.

Justice Minister Daniel Delgado said the government would investigate the shooting and appealed for calm.

"The government ... deplores the death of a Panamanian citizen," he told a news conference, but added: "The situation is intolerable. It is putting the safety of Panamanians at risk. It is not possible for it to continue."

Wednesday's clashes left debris strewn across many of Panama City's main thoroughfares, with sirens from emergency vehicles blaring for much of the day.