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Bolivia: The Rule of Law must not be weakened by social conflict

The Bolivian authorities must take immediate measures to restore order within the rule of law and to guarantee respect for human rights, declared Amnesty International.

The public protests of 12 and 13 February led to clashes with the army that left more than 20 dead in the city of La Paz and around 100 wounded in various towns throughout the country. The protests, started by units of the Bolivian National Police and later joined by various sectors of Bolivian society, were in response to the government's recent economic policies.

"These events must be promptly investigated and those responsible brought to justice. The action of the army – which seems to have shown excessive use of force – and the reported presence of snipers during these unfortunate events, warrants an immediate and independent investigation," said Amnesty International.

"The authorities' immediate action in response to the social upheaval causing unrest in the country will be decisive in guaranteeing full respect for human rights."

The human rights organisation urged the Bolivian authorities to ensure that law enforcement officials adhere strictly to international standards regarding the use of force and firearms when dealing with demonstrations and riots.

"It is the government's responsibility to avoid the social upheaval in Bolivia from reaching even greater proportions – but it is also the task of all other political sectors and civil society to help achieve this."

Amnesty International called upon the authorities and Bolivian society as a whole to re-open channels for dialogue that can offer short and long-term solutions as well as a strengthening of the rule of law.

"A weakening of the rule of law could degenerate into even more serious human rights violations," warned Amnesty International.

"The guiding principle of all solutions to the current conflict must be full respect for human rights."

Background

The announcement that a 12.5 per cent tax was to be imposed on salaries created general discontent and a demonstration in the Plaza Murillo opposite the Government Palace (*Palacio de Gobierno*) in La Paz on the part of units of the National Police. According to information received, members of the army responsible for protecting the Government Palace used firearms and tear gas to disperse the demonstrators.

The National Police, demanding a 40% wage increase, rejected the new tax. Traffic police, fire-fighters, union members and other sectors joined the protest. Demonstrations were also held in Santa Cruz, Cochabamba and other parts of the country. Taking advantage of the absence of normal police patrols on the streets, individuals took to looting, with damage being caused to public buildings and shops.

On 13 February, the President of the Republic announced the withdrawal of the draft bill applying the new income tax, known as the "*impuestazo*" ('tax hike'), from Congress. The same day, through the mediation of the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights (*Asamblea Permanente de Derechos Humanos*), the authorities reached an agreement with the police to grant most of their demands.

The situation remains unstable and further demonstrations have been announced.

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