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Bolivia: Respect for human rights is fundamental to stop escalation of violence

The escalation of violence in the half moon (“media luna”) departments of Santa Cruz, Tarija, Beni and Pando as well as Chuquisaca department, over recent days gives serious cause for concern for the situation of human rights in the country.

Violence has flared up at several stages of a process to reform the constitution that began in 2006, as regional sensibilities around the issue of autonomy have led to polarisation in responses. Discrimination and racism against the indigenous population of Bolivia has been an underlying feature of these tensions.

The recent recall referendum, held on 10 August 2008 validated the mandate of the current president, Evo Morales, but also demonstrated some consolidation of the support to regional prefects in opposition. Protests and violence leading up to the referendum were briefly quelled, but have once again resumed, apparently exacerbated by the political polarisation demonstrated in the referendum. According to some reports, eight people were killed and over 30 injured in clashes near Cobija in Pando department on 11 September.

Groups of vigilantes in Santa Cruz, allegedly including the Union Juvenil Crucenista, have targeted media outlets and NGOs, in particular those working with indigenous communities in defence of their human rights. One NGO, CEJIS, has been the subject of 15 attacks over the past five years, culminating with the storming of their office on 9 September.

The national government has apparently been unable to quell the violent protests. Several prefects and civic leaders have publicly justified recourse to force to further the autonomy agenda of the “media luna” departments, though they have recently sought to distance themselves from the violent tactics employed by vigilante groups.

“Intervention of the government is essential to maintaining the rule of law in Bolivia, and must be conducted with full respect for human rights”, said Susan Lee, Americas Director at Amnesty International. All parties to the current violence have the responsibility to ensure that the climate of tension and violence does not worsen, and that human rights and the rule of law, as guaranteed by the Constitution, are respected at every stage so as to bring a sustainable resolution of the current crisis.

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