

Honduran Students and University Officials Hit Deadlock in Talks



Tegucigalpa, July 22 (RHC)-- Protesting students and university officials in Honduras continue to clash despite attempts at dialogue as the movement accused authorities of not negotiating in good faith after the administration refused to sign a third-party proposal on how to resolve the crisis rocking the national public university.

Talks between the University Student Movement, also known as MEU, and university administrators broke down earlier this week after an agreement last week set the stage for a dialogue process between the two sides of the conflict. University authorities claimed that the students introduced new conditions for the negotiations after a preliminary pre-dialogue deal had already been struck last Friday, local media reported.

But the modified conditions have been proposed independently by Honduras' National Commissioner on Human Rights, or Conadeh, to support the dialogue process amid concerns about the deadlock. The national student movement—including MEU and other organizations—signed off on the recommendations, while authorities rejected the proposal.

Authorities have demanded that students stop occupying buildings at the National Autonomous University of Honduras, also known as UNAH, as a condition for dialogue. But the Conadeh proposal endorsed by the students calls on both sides to commit to reaching a consensus on controversial changes to academic rules, setting an agreement as a condition for students to lift their occupation and allow normal functioning of the university.

The students have also called for all charges against 75 students across the country to be dropped. Twenty-two of the students, slapped with charges of usurpation on July 1 after occupying university buildings, were set to appear in court Wednesday morning, but the hearing was postponed until next week.

Students seized classrooms at the UNAH campus in Tegucigalpa in early June to ramp up their protest against the privatization of public education and the lack of student representation in decision-making. Protests also erupted at other UNAH locations, including at the campus in the second-largest city of San Pedro Sula.

The conflict reached a fever pitch when police evicted students from the campus on July 1st, one day after the rector announced plans to cancel the next academic term across several faculties in light of lost class time because of the protests. MEU slammed the announcement as arbitrary, arguing that the rector did not have the power to make such a decision.

Local media have largely framed the protests as a rejection of changes to academic regulations, including a higher minimum grade required to pass, that some students fear will impact their ability to graduate.

But the student movement has made clear that their occupation is more broadly about the defense of public education in the face of creeping fees and a lack of democratic involvement of the students body in policy decisions.

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