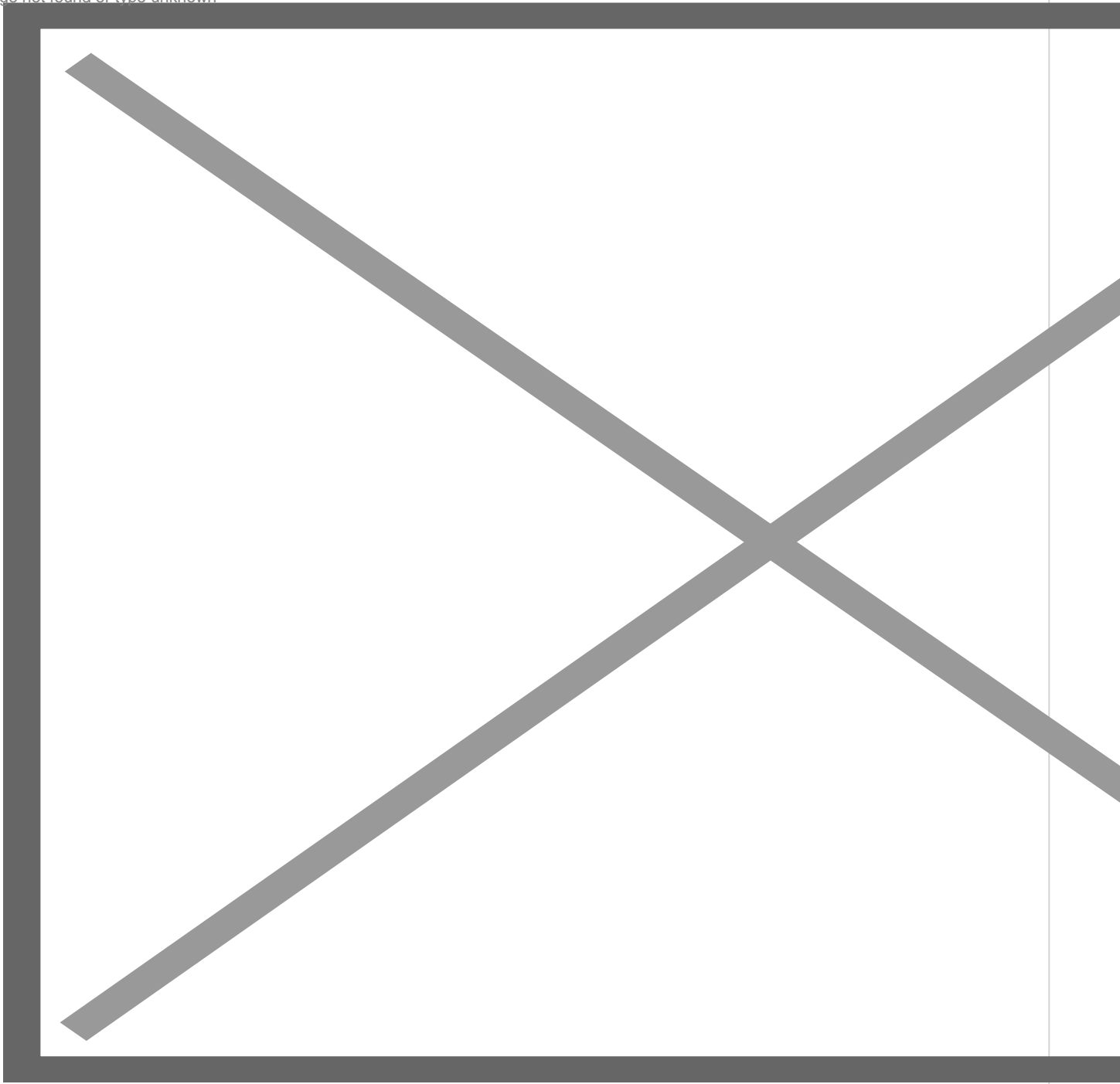


Guatemalan protesters torch Congress as anger boils over

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Demonstrators demanding the resignation of President Alejandro Giammattei in Guatemala City. (Photo: AFP)

Guatemala City, November 21 (RHC)-- Protesters set part of the Congress of the Republic of Guatemala building on fire Saturday, after a controversial budget bill brought a series of long-simmering crises to a boiling point, spurring anti-government demonstrations.

Thousands of people took to city and town squares around the country with demands ranging from a presidential veto of the budget bill and prosecution of corruption to resignations across all branches of government and the constitutional assembly.

“We’re tired of corruption,” Karla Figueroa, a 51-year-old professional translator, told reporters at a rally in Guatemala City’s central plaza, where she held a sign calling for the resignation of 125 of the country’s 160 legislators. “It doesn’t matter which government – they’re all the same,” Figueroa said.

Guatemala’s Congress passed the budget bill Tuesday night, increasing lawmakers’ own stipends for meals and other expenses and cutting funding for human rights programmes and the judiciary. They also axed \$25 million destined to combat malnutrition, igniting nationwide outrage. A subsequent amendment that restored those funds did nothing to quell peoples’ anger.

While Congress passed the budget at breakneck speed in the capital, rains from Tropical Storm Iota were flooding regions already devastated when Hurricane Eta swept through Central America earlier this month. Thousands remain in shelters, some of which have had confirmed cases of COVID-19.

More than 100 Indigenous villagers were buried in landslides in several regions after the storm, and subsistence crops were destroyed across vast swathes of the country.

Guatemala has one of the world’s highest rates of chronic malnutrition and the hurricanes have exacerbated hunger; for many, the funding cut affecting malnutrition was the last straw. Calls for protests grew, as did widespread demands that President Alejandro Giammattei veto the budget bill.

When he did not, Vice President Guillermo Castillo said Friday that he had called on Giammattei to join him in resigning for the good of the country. Before the protests began Saturday, Giammattei said he would meet with various sectors and present proposed reforms to the budget in the coming days.

But that did not curb the demonstrations. “I think this is just the beginning,” said Flori Salguero, 48, one of the more than 1,000 people who arrived in Guatemala City’s plaza well ahead of the set protest start time.

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