

Colombians protest for eighth consecutive day



Demonstrators clash with riot police during a protest against President Ivan Duque's government at Bolivar Square in Bogota on May 5 [Juan Barreto/AFP]

Bogota, May 6 (RHC)-- Anti-government protests took place across Colombia for the eighth straight day on Wednesday, as rights groups continue to raise concerns about excessive violence by security forces.

Riot police used tear gas to disperse demonstrators from the main public square in the capital, Bogota, at around 3pm on Wednesday, as well as in other parts of the city where people had assembled. But the protesters have said they will continue to take to the streets, despite right-wing President Ivan Duque withdrawing the contentious tax reform that pushed them to protest in the first place last week.

“Yes, they’ve withdrawn the reform, but they haven’t changed it,” said 48-year-old emerald trade union worker, Olga Cabos, who took part in the second national strike since April 28 in downtown Bogota. “We can’t let this government of Duque continue to keep making things harder for the poorest of us,” she told Al Jazeera, brandishing an anti-government placard.

The protests were sparked by an unpopular tax reform that the government said aimed to stabilise an economy ravished by the coronavirus pandemic. But working- and middle-class Colombians said the plan favoured the rich while placing more pressure on them.

Duque withdrew the proposal on Sunday and his finance minister resigned a day later, but the protesters are now calling for a withdrawal of a proposed health reform and a guaranteed basic income of one million pesos (\$260) for all Colombians, among other demands.

“Although the tax reform was the initial spark, current protests in Colombia reflect a wide range of social, political and economic grievances that the Duque government will be hard-pressed to address with existing scripts for national dialogue,” said Arlene Tickner, a political science professor at Bogota’s Rosario University.

Violence increased late on Monday in the country’s third largest city, Cali, where protesters said police opened fire to disperse the crowds. Videos of police misconduct in Cali were shared widely on social media on Tuesday. On-the-ground sources said police indiscriminately shot at demonstrators, even from helicopters.

The death toll related to the protests remains widely disputed and wide-ranging between the government and independent NGOs. Colombia’s human rights ombudsman says 24 people have died, while local NGO Temblores, which documents police abuse, estimates that 37 have been killed.

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