

150,000 Students Rally for Free University Education in Chile



Santiago de Chile, April 17 (teleSUR-RHC)-- A large march of over 150,000 people called by student leaders to demand free, quality, public education and to reject the meddling of corrupt politicians was met with police repression on Thursday.

Police launched tear gas and used water cannons to disperse protesters. Some in the crowd responded by throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails.

The protest also called for a change in the country's political process, including greater participation for Chileans in decision-making. The President of the Confederation of Chilean Students (Confech), Valentina Saavedra, told reporters: "Enough of this democracy which only serves the big businessmen, which is at the service of a select few."

The country has also been dealing with the fall-out over a major corruption scandal known as the Penta case involving irregular campaign financing. The Penta scandal, named after the financial investment group implicated in the case, led to the resignation of the president and vice-president of the right-wing Independent Democratic Union party. It has also incriminated President Bachelet's eldest son, Sebastian Davalos, who was accused of using his influence to secure a bank loan from Penta.

The Chilean president has embarked on a series of reforms and has promised universal higher education by 2016 in response to massive student protests over the last few years. However, students are concerned that the state will not allocate sufficient funds in order for the reform to go ahead and say the government may backtrack on its promise.

The Ministry of Education is studying a controversial proposal to charge a special tax on professionals who have completed higher education and earn a high wage. That idea, however, has been rejected outright by some lawmakers and Confech President Valentina Saavedra.

The scandals and a series of badly handled natural disasters have badly hurt Bachelet's approval ratings, which plunged to their lowest level ever at the beginning of the month.

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