

Chile's Piñera increases minimum wage, protests continue



Santiago de Chile, November 7 (RHC)-- Amid massive protests and a popular rebellion calling for the government's resignation and a total overhaul of the political and economic system, Chilean President Sebastián Piñera signed a bill that establishes a minimum income for workers of 350,000 pesos, about \$475 USD.

The reform is a state subsidy that will benefit 540,000 vulnerable workers whose salaries exceed the current minimum wage (301,000 pesos or \$409) but do not reach 350,000 pesos.

"Almost all the beneficiaries of this State subsidy work in SMEs," Piñera said at a ceremony at the headquarters of the Executive, in which he stressed that this measure will have a "very important cost" for the fiscal coffers of some 190,000 million pesos, about US\$258 million the first year. "With this, we are responding with facts and not only with good intentions to what people have so strongly demanded," Piñera added.

The minimum guaranteed income is one of the promises on the social agenda that Piñera presented on October 22nd, at the height of the social unrest with protests and mass demonstrations that have left 20 dead and thousands injured and detained.

The president's plan also includes raising pensions, reducing the salaries of lawmakers, improving public health and stabilizing the prices of services such as electricity and transport, among other measures.

Piñera said that it is a "very vast" agenda that covers "very sensitive and high demands by Chileans" and will benefit more than 15 million citizens. The president also referred to some acts of violence that have taken place over the past 20 days and has left thousands injured, both civilians and agents of the security forces, and ruled out that the government is giving preferential treatment to police officers injured in the unrest.

"There is no difference, just as we have visited the police and carabineros wounded in confrontations, also some ministers, and I will also do it personally, we will visit civilians who have been victims of violence during these last weeks," he said.

Piñera reiterated his "absolute respect" for human rights amid allegations of police abuses that have occurred since the beginning of the unrest and stressed that cases of "excessive use of force" will be investigated by the Prosecutor's Office and tried by the courts.

Police and army forces have been accused of torture and sexual abuse of those detained, according to multiple independent human rights organizations. Activists say that such actions are reminiscent of the abuses carried out by security forces during the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

Despite Piñera's attempt at appeasing the protesters, demonstrations have continued with protesters demanding that congress approves the creation of a constituent assembly that would rewrite the constitution. The current one was written by the dictatorship government and is plagued with neoliberal and hyper-capitalist laws and policies that leave no room for social programs, free education or rights for Indigenous people or minorities.

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