

Peruvian mine workers block highway as labor protests spread

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The workers' protests have increased pressure on Peru's newly appointed President Francisco Sagasti. (Photo: Reuters)

Lima, December 5 (RHC)-- Mineworkers in Peru on Friday joined a growing group of farmworkers in blocking major highways throughout the country, ratcheting up pressure on newly appointed interim President Francisco Sagasti.

Hundreds of union members from the Doe Run metallurgical plant, located in the Andean town of La Oroya, blockaded a highway critical to the supply of food to the capital, Lima.

“We want to be given the management of the company after the failure of the government and its liquidation committee to sell the complex to a new operator,” the leader of the La Oroya workers union, Luis Castillo, told Reuters News Agency.

The mineworkers joined continuing labour protests launched this week by Peruvian farmworkers, who are demanding higher wages and protesting against a law that exempts them from benefits given to other workers, including annual bonuses and vacation time.

This week, the farmworkers cut off transit on the main highway north and south of Lima, snarling traffic and leaving hundreds of buses and tractor-trailer trucks carrying fresh fruit stranded. At least one protester had died as of Thursday.

“Police came storming in to shoot. It was an act of violence,” labour leader Walter Campos told AFP news agency, describing the victim as a 19-year-old worker.

Sagasti, the president, confirmed the death and promised to launch an investigation into what happened in the town of Viru, where workers were blocking the Pan-American Highway. The president reiterated a call for security forces to be cautious following the death of the protester.

“I have instructed the minister of the interior to take charge of police operations, which must be carried out according to constitutional and legal provisions to restore internal order and social peace,” Sagasti said on Twitter.

Peru has been severely battered by the COVID-19 pandemic, experiencing both a crushing economic contraction and one of the world’s most deadly outbreaks of the novel coronavirus. For months, Peru ranked first globally in per capita COVID-19 deaths, while the International Monetary Fund projected the country would see a 14 percent decline in its gross domestic product this year.

The government has provided millions in aid to large exporters – a tiny percentage of all producers – but experts said small farmers have been left out. Former President Martin Vizcarra, who was removed from office by Congress earlier this month, allotted \$42 million to various large agricultural companies.

Sagasti has said he intends to support small farmers with access to land, technology and markets, although he has yet to share any details of those plans.

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