

Four more Colombian protesters killed as death toll rises

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Demonstrators hold makeshift shields during a protest in Cali, Colombia, where three people were killed on Friday [Juan B Diaz/Reuters]

Bogota, May 29 (RHC)-- Four people were killed in Colombia on Friday as tens of thousands of protesters marked a month of demonstrations across the country, while talks between the government and the national strike committee stalled.

In Cali, which has become an epicentre of the nationwide protests, Mayor Jorge Ospina confirmed three of the deaths. Local media reported the fourth death occurred on the road between Cali and the town of Candelaria.

Demonstrations elsewhere were mostly peaceful, although clashes between police and protesters were reported in some areas, such as the municipality of Madrid, near Bogota. "There must be dialogue between those calling for strikes, the national government, and the whole of society. If there are no talks, the spiral of violence will continue and unfortunately, more people could die," Ospina said.

Two people in Cali were killed when an agent of the attorney general's investigative unit opened fire on civilians, before also being killed, Attorney General Francisco Barbosa said in a televised message. The agent was not on duty at the time, Barbosa said.

Violence has marked demonstrations during the last four weeks. The government has so far confirmed 17 civilian deaths as directly connected with protests, while human rights groups claim dozens more civilians have been killed by security forces. Two police officers were also earlier reported killed during the protests.

The protests began last month after right-wing Colombian President Ivan Duque's government introduced a tax reform that critics said would disproportionately harm the working and middle classes, already hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Amid singing and music during demonstrations in capital Bogota, protesters told the Reuters news agency they would keep marching even after a month of demonstrations.

Since the withdrawal of the tax reform at the start of the month, protester demands have expanded to include a basic income, opportunities for young people and an end to police violence.

"Until the government listens to us, we have to stay in the streets," said Alejandro Franco, 23. Close to graduating, he told Reuters he was marching for better education and health, among other reasons. "If the people don't have peace, then neither will the government," he added.

Some said the long-running protests are putting them under financial pressure. "I have to close my shop every time there are protests," Laudice Ramirez, 62, said in the south of the city. "I'm going bankrupt, but the youth don't have any other options for opportunities."

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