

Colombian Congress to resume debate on health care reform

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By María Josefina Arce

This week will continue in Congress the debate on health reform, a proposal of the government of Colombian President Gustavo Petro, aimed at a necessary transformation of the health system, with a large private presence, to make access to health care a universal and inclusive right.

The initiative, one of his main electoral promises, seeks, as the president has assured, to ensure that healthcare ceases to be a business and truly guarantees the welfare of citizens.

At present, the system is governed by the so-called EPS, Entidades Promotoras de Salud, which have been at the center of public criticism due to corruption scandals and have been accused of putting their economic interests before those of their patients.

In fact, in the last four years, the South American nation's justice system has convicted 22 former EPS officials for their involvement in the embezzlement of the Colombian healthcare system's resources.

Medicines for the deceased, falsification of documents related to medical records and high-cost treatments for alleged illnesses of some patients have been some of the criminal methods used to seize state money.

According to the authorities, from January to July last year alone, more than 700,000 complaints, denunciations and petitions were filed against the EPSs by patients in need of immediate assistance.

Another flaw in the current health system is that care does not reach everyone equally. For residents in rural areas, access to medical centers is extremely difficult, as in many cases they must travel long distances.

Official data indicate that some 600 municipalities do not have a medical post in the countryside and 300 do not have delivery rooms either.

The highest maternal mortality rates are concentrated in rural areas because health and family planning services are not affordable.

These inequities are what the current government wants to eliminate with its health reform proposal, which emphasizes prevention in order to cover all the factors that influence health in a comprehensive manner.

Filed last February in Congress for debate, it was approved last May in its first discussion in the House of Representatives. But the opposition has tried with various tricks to delay the process which puts at risk a proposal in favor of all Colombians.

The authorities point out that the debate is necessary because, they emphasized, Colombia deserves a good discussion that will benefit everyone.

Petro has assured that the health system that will emerge from this law is planned, with a strong state presence, which also allows the private sector and that it will provide coverage to all Colombian society.

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