

Dozens injured as Peruvian protesters and police clash



Demonstrators clash with police during protests following the impeachment of President Martin Vizcarra. (Photo: Reuters)

Lima, November 14 (RHC)-- Clashes between Peruvian protesters and police have reportedly injured at least 27 people as thousands took to the streets of the Latin American nation to protest the recent impeachment of President Martin Vizcarra by legislators.

Authorities said Friday the clashes had left 16 civilians wounded, mostly by rubber bullets, adding that 11 police officers were also injured. Earlier, on Thursday night, police used tear gas and rubber bullets against protesters, some of whom threw rocks at officers and destroyed store windows and cash machines as Peru experiences the largest demonstrations in the country in the past two decades.

Peru's National Human Rights Coordinator also said that 11 people were wounded on Thursday, including some journalists. In addition, at least two people were injured by rubber bullets. The unrest over the last four nights, as well as other more peaceful protests in the capital Lima and other cities followed the ouster of Vizcarra earlier in the week by Peru's fragmented Congress, mounting pressure on legislators and the new government of President Manuel Merino, who rose to power as the Speaker of Congress after the impeachment vote.

Merino, an agronomist and businessman, assumed office on Tuesday as Peru's third president in four years, calling for calm and assuring Peruvians that the April 11 presidential election would be held as planned.

Constitutionally, succession fell to Merino because Peru has not replaced former vice-president Mercedes Araoz, who resigned a year ago in the wake of a separate political crisis. Vizcarra, a politically unaffiliated centrist who was popular with voters, was ousted on Monday in an impeachment trial over accusations of receiving bribes, charges that he has strongly denied but vowed not to challenge in court.

Merino, a member of the center-right Popular Action Party who had been the head of Congress until the impeachment vote, took over the presidency by law and swore in his new cabinet on Thursday. During the protest rallies, some demonstrators carried banners comparing Merino to the coronavirus pandemic and insisting that he did not represent them.

"We're in the streets spontaneously and peacefully defending Peruvian democracy from an abuse by Congress," said Gino Costa, a lawmaker from Peru's progressive Morado Party who joined Thursday's protests.

Meanwhile, Peru's new Interior Minister Gastón Rodríguez denied reports that the police had used lethal weapons, noting that they had only fired tear gas and rubber bullets when a protest had got out of hand. "The reaction of the police occurs when there is an attack on public property or when there is a direct attack as happened yesterday," he said during a press briefing.

International human rights groups have reportedly expressed concern about the use of force by police against protesters and the US-based Organization of American States has called on Peru's Constitutional Court to provide clarity on the constitutionality of the impeachment process.

Vizcarra reportedly oversaw an anti-graft campaign that led to frequent quarrels with legislators in a country that has a history of political upheaval and corruption. A judge ordered Vizcarra on Friday not to leave Peru while prosecutors probe the allegations against him.

Vizcarra's ouster plunged the world's No. 2 copper producer into political crisis as it looks to recover from an economic recession brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

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