

Over 120,000 Chilean students march against profits and sexism



Santiago de Chile, April 21 (RHC)-- More than 120,000 students marched in several Chilean cities in order to denounce "profit-making, student debts and sexism" in higher education, in the first major protest under the month-old administration of conservative President Sebastian Pinera, according to the Confederation of Chile's Students (Confech) that organized the event among others.

The marches, attended by students and professors, follow a recent decision by the country's constitutional court to overturn a law that prohibited for-profit companies from controlling universities. "We would prefer to be in the classroom...but unfortunately, we can't do it with dignity because there continues to be profiteering (in education) in Chile," said Sandra Beltrami, a spokeswoman for the students.

Banging drums, holding banners and sometimes throwing rocks and blocking traffic, students marched through downtown Santiago, occasionally sparking small confrontations with police, who used tear gas to disperse the protesters. Other protests took place in Coquimbo, Valparaíso and Temuco.

The protest was the first under Pinera, a conservative billionaire and ex-president whose first term between 2010 and 2014 was marred by massive student protests seeking an education overhaul.

Earlier this week, Pinera sent a bill to Chile's Congress to increase public financing for technical colleges and promised that access to free higher education was "here to stay," a move seen as intended to defuse

tensions with students.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Chile has the fourth-most-expensive university system in the world. Higher education was free in the country until 1981, when Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship paved the way for the emergence of private universities with no constraints on tuition fees.

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