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Bogota, August 27 (RHC)-- Thousands of protesters demonstrated peacefully in Colombia on Thursday to urge its congress to approve union-backed social and economic policies supporters say will benefit the most vulnerable.

Unions, student organizations and other groups held some six weeks of marches between the end of April and June to reject a subsequently-withdrawn tax reform and other bills they said would perpetuate deep inequality. Road blockades associated with the protests halted exports and led to shortages.

At times, the protests spiraled into violence, and at least 24 people have been killed. Human rights groups say the toll was higher and have accused the police of heavy-handed tactics.

A new watered-down \$3.9 billion version of the tax reform, which was approved by congressional economic committees on Wednesday, was the focus of ire for many marchers on Thursday. The bill would raise corporate taxes and enshrine some spending cuts.

The unions and others who organized the protests are pushing for an alternative package of reforms that include a monthly basic income of \$235 for 7.5 million poor families for 13 months, free university education, and financial aid for small businesses. The bills appear to have little support among lawmakers.

"It seems as if the Congress doesn't want to listen to the population," Central Union of Workers president Francisco Maltes told Reuters.

President Ivan Duque, who leaves office next August, looks likely to win approval for the tax bill. But other unpopular proposals his government have floated have little chance of passing, analysts and lawmakers recently told Reuters.

"We are here and we will stay as long as is necessary and until we see definitive results," said public employee Jimena Ortiz, 47, as she marched to Bogota's historic center. The strike committee - which had temporarily suspended marches in June - has also called off its participation in talks with the government, which sought to end protests.

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