

Protests continue in Ecuador against rising fuel prices

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Protests against the economic policies of conservative Ecuadorean President Guillermo Lasso have ended their second day

Quito, October 28 (RHC)-- Indigenous and rural Ecuadorans have blocked roads in several provinces on the second day of protests against rising fuel prices amid a state of emergency as the president called for dialogue.

Ecuador's President Guillermo Lasso, a conservative ex-banker who took office in May, on Wednesday said his government would keep security forces on highways to maintain order.

Last Friday, Lasso announced a 12 percent increase in fuel prices, which have nearly doubled since last year, bringing the price of diesel to \$1.90 a gallon (\$0.50 a litre) and \$2.55 a gallon (\$0.67 a litre) for petrol, setting off the largest protests since he took office.

"I call once more for dialogue, for consensus, for thinking of the good of the country and not of personal, party or union interests," Lasso said on Wednesday during a military ceremony. "In these moments of economic recovery, it's time to be united."

Demonstrators argue the increased cost falls unfairly on regular citizens already struggling economically because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ecuador Confederation of Indigenous Nations (CONAIE), the group who called the protests, wants fuel prices capped at \$1.50 a gallon (\$0.39 a litre) for diesel and \$2 a gallon (\$0.53 litre) for petrol.

"The government has messed up, pushing fuel prices up all the time," protester Dennis Viteri, a 28-year-old textile worker told AFP on Wednesday at a blockade northeast of the capital Quito.

Viteri and others used soil, tree trunks and burning tyres to block a portion of the Pan-American highway which connects Quito with Colombia. Demonstrators have disrupted traffic in at least five of Ecuador's 24 provinces.

Reducing fuel subsidies, which began under former president Lenin Moreno, is one way for Ecuador to shrink spending in exchange for loans from the International Monetary Fund. But poverty now affects about 47 percent of Ecuadorans and nearly a third do not have full-time work.

At least eight police officers were injured during demonstrations on Tuesday and 37 people were arrested for blocking roads, the government said. Protest organizers said demonstrators had also been hurt but did not give a figure.

Lasso declared a 60-day state of emergency last week to tackle rising crime and violence blamed on duelling drug traffickers in the country nestled between the world's two biggest cocaine producers: Colombia and Peru.

The state of emergency, decreed after some 240 gang-aligned inmates were killed in prison clashes since January, allows for the deployment of troops to help fight a crime wave.

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