

Indigenous protesters block roads in Ecuador over rising costs

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Indigenous people and farmers block a road in San Juan de Pastocalle, Cotopaxi province, Ecuador, June 13, 2022 [Cristina Vega Rhor/AFP]

Quito, June 13 (RHC)-- Indigenous groups have set up roadblocks on highways in Ecuador in protest of rising gasoline prices and the economic policies of right-wing President Guillermo Lasso.

The protesters were blocking roads with burning tires, stones, trees and mounds of earth in at least 10 of the country's 24 provinces, including Pichincha, home to the capital Quito, authorities said on Monday.

They are calling on Lasso's government to freeze gasoline costs at a lower price, stop plans to expand oil and mining development, and extend deadlines for small farmers to pay off debts with banks.

"We have had to resort to resistance in view of the national government putting in place more and more policies of death, which don't allow us to sustain our small economies," Leonidas Iza, head of the CONAIE Indigenous organisation, told reporters.

"Mr President, respond to the people on the most urgent, necessary and painful issues," Iza said as he stood with dozens of other Indigenous people on a highway south of Quito, urging Lasso not to allow the International Monetary Fund to "impose" policy.

Lasso in October froze prices for the most-used gasoline and for diesel at higher rates than had been in place before he took office. That sparked protests that ended when the government opened talks with Indigenous leaders and other organisations.

The talks have continued since then, but Indigenous leaders say the government is not listening to their concerns and therefore they have decided to restart demonstrations.

Another member of CONAIE, Manuel Cocha, told the AFP news agency that the demonstrations would continue "until the government listens to us".

"The policies of Guillermo Lasso's government are hitting us again" by causing an increase in food costs in the last few months, Cocha said.

Late on Sunday, Lasso said on social media that "we will not allow the interruption of roads and highways" or "the takeover of oil wells nor of public service". He added that the blockades would affect the nation's economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. "We will not allow the country to be paralysed," he also tweeted on Monday morning.

Meanwhile, interior minister Patricio Carrillo said Ecuadorian police would maintain "public order." "As a government we will always guarantee the right to peaceful protest," he wrote on Twitter, adding, however, that people "want an Ecuador of opportunity" – not to live in a "chaotic" country beset by stoppages.

Police commander Fausto Salinas said roads leading to the capital were currently blocked and urged the protesters to lift the blockades.

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