

MEXICO - Oaxaca Protesters on Red Alert

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IPS - In the heart of this southern Mexican city, protesters grouped in more than 350 different social organisations, who have been camping out in the parks and on the streets for over four months, are governing through people's assemblies and running radio stations that they have taken over, while their own security guards keep watch.

The movement, which began with a routine teachers' strike for higher wages, has expelled all public officials from their local government posts, demanding in-depth changes and the resignation of the governor of the state of Oaxaca, one of the poorest in the country along with the neighbouring Chiapas and Guerrero.

But the activists are now facing the threat of the use of force by the government of President Vicente Fox.

"The revolution is the movement of the organised people, and what we have here is a revolutionary movement," Ramiro Esperanza, a 25-year-old teacher who belongs to the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO), told IPS.

"But we are looking for solutions within the institutions, and without the use of arms. We do not want bloodshed," he added.

Esperanza, who has been camping out since May 22 in one of the dozens of camps set up by the movement in the capital, says APPO is here to stay, and that it will spread to other states.

As he talks to IPS, children play nearby, and the loudspeaker of a truck can be heard in the distance blaring over and over again "the people united will never be defeated."

Thousands of police have gathered on the outskirts of the city, and on the Pacific coasts of the state, hundreds of soldiers and Navy sailors are preparing for deployment. "We expect the blows to come soon, but we're going to stick it out here," says Esperanza.

The APPO encampments, where hundreds of bottles have been stocked to make Molotov cocktails and many protesters have armed themselves with sticks and slingshots, are guarded by local residents from behind barriers made of sandbags, rocks, scrap metal and burnt-out buses.

During the daytime, thousands of people circulate among the camps without any problem, and calm reigns. But at night, the access roads are blocked and the "topiles" (the local vigilantes) patrol the streets armed with firecrackers and carrying radios and cell-phones to communicate among themselves.

In the camps, where sleeping and cooking spaces are covered with sheets of plastic, there is a unanimous rejection of the use of violence, and demonstrators complain that at night irregular armed groups, who they identify as off-duty police officers, shoot at them.

In addition, say the activists, several of their leaders were illegally detained.

The possibility that federal troops will be called in to break up the movement has become more real in the last few hours, after APPO refused to attend talks in Mexico City Wednesday called by President Fox, to which representatives of other sectors from Oaxaca, like business, political leaders, "parents" and the Catholic Church were also invited.

The government promised that the institutional reforms needed in Oaxaca would be discussed in the talks, including the possibility of a law authorising the organisation of referendums that would allow voters to recall the state governor.

If the possibilities of dialogue are exhausted, force will be used as a last resort, said Fox, who has pledged to resolve the conflict before he leaves office on Dec. 1 and hands over to his successor Felipe Calderón, also from the conservative governing National Action Party (PAN).

"The negotiating forum that they invited us to is a sham, because they called together individuals who do not represent the people of Oaxaca. They just want to justify" calling in the army, said Esperanza.

There have been three failed attempts at talks between APPO and the government in the past few months.

APPO's main demand is the resignation of Governor Ulises Ruiz of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled the country from 1929 to 2000 and continues to govern the state of Oaxaca

Ruiz was elected in 2004 in elections that the opposition says were fixed. He is accused of corruption and human rights abuses, and of governing in a despotic manner, brutally cracking down on protests, and encouraging the police to form paramilitary groups to squelch dissent and opposition.

"Fuera Ulises Ruiz asesino" (Out with Ulises Ruiz the Murderer) is written on many walls in the city of Oaxaca.

The central government does not have the power to remove governors from office. The national Senate holds the key here, as it can institute impeachment proceedings. But legislators of the PAN and the PRI have decided to block that option.

The four radio stations taken over by APPO repeatedly broadcast messages on Wednesday saying that police and federal soldiers would be entering the city at any moment.

"Compañeros, we don't want anybody to die, but we're ready to accept casualties if that's the way the government wants it," said one of the movement's spokespersons on La Ley radio, which has been under the control of APPO since June. (APPO gave up control of one of the radio stations on Wednesday.)

However, Esperanza said that "if the soldiers come in with guns blazing, we won't have any choice but to retreat, and come back later." To expose "our children is senseless, and I don't want to die here," he said.

"Now, if they want to arrest the leaders, they'd better build a wall around the whole of Oaxaca and put us all in jail, because we're not going to give up the fight," said the young primary school teacher, a member of the Revolutionary Popular Front, a group inspired by Marxism-Leninism.

The conflict began on May 22, when the teachers' union in Oaxaca, Section 22 of the National Union of Education Workers, declared a strike demanding higher wages.

When teachers camping in the city centre were violently removed on Jun. 14, other groups joined their voice to the union's demands, and the movement gelled with the formation of APPO.

"The teachers' strike grew from a trade union movement into a broad, diverse movement reflecting most of the social grievances" of the people of Oaxaca, according to a report by the non-governmental Oaxacan Human Rights Network.

The Network confirms APPO's denunciations of paramilitary activity and arbitrary arrests. But it also says members of the Assembly have committed acts of violence against people who do not support them, and have been on the brink of lynching several people.

In recent weeks, supposed guerrilla groups have made their appearance in parts of Oaxaca to salute the social struggle. And on Monday, one of them allegedly detonated small pipe bombs in the doorways of two

banks in the city.

APPO says it had nothing to do with the explosions, which it said were most likely part of a government strategy to justify calling in the troops.

Business owners and shopkeepers in Oaxaca, who are suffering losses as a result of the conflict, accuse the social movement of being violent. So do some politicians, spokespeople for Fox and Catholic Church leaders.

"My group (the Revolutionary Popular Front) defends Marxism-Leninism, but we don't think this is the right time for an armed struggle. We don't want guerrilla groups with two or three guns madly opening fire in the mountains; that's not the way now," Esperanza said.

The APPO umbrella has brought together leftist organisations of different tendencies, including some that have clashed over vision and strategy in the past.

Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in this country of over 104 million people. In Oaxaca, 80.3 percent of the population lack sanitation services, street lighting, piped water and paved streets, the Oaxacan Human Rights Network reported.

According to the Network, founded in 1996 by a number of human rights groups, eight out of 10 Oaxacans live in extreme poverty.

Within the state population of 3.5 million, the richest 10 percent of households receives 13 times the income of the poorest 10 percent, said the organisation.

"In the present circumstances. Oaxacan society faces a choice between giving up its aspirations and making do with the current system, or trying to reform the state in order to design, organise and evaluate a form of government that will fully guarantee the exercise of human rights," said the Network.

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