

Ecuador unrest: Amazonian women denounce 'state violence'

Indigenous protesters accuse security forces of using excessive force as demonstrations continue for tenth day.

By Kimberley Brown

Al Jazeera (13.10.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2oHUBE3> – Lineth Calapucha distributed blankets and clothes to other protesters in a cultural centre in the Ecuadorian capital Quito on Friday as the sounds of bombs from tear gas and pepper spray echoed outside.

It was the ninth day of anti-government protests that began as calls for President Lenin Moreno to abandon fuel subsidy cuts and labour and tax reforms. But for indigenous protesters, it has since grown into a wider movement against the government's treatment of indigenous people and their land.

"What we're asking for is peace, tranquillity, and that the government understand that we, the people and [indigenous] nationalities act peacefully," Calapucha told Al Jazeera, as women and children streamed into the cultural centre to take shelter.

"Look, even now, we weren't even doing anything and they

started launching tear gas," she said.

Calapucha is one of dozens of women from the Amazonian Women's collective who travelled to Quito to join the national protests and denounce the "inhumane repression" of protesters by police.

"We are women of peace, defenders of our territories and our families," the collective said in a statement on Saturday.

"We have come in peace but the state, as always, received us again with violence," the women added. "We want to build a society and a country where our rights are respected."

Moreno declared a state of emergency and moved the government out of Quito earlier this week as tens of thousands of protesters converged on the capital, vowing to stay put until the government reverses its decision to cut the decades-old fuel subsidies and roll back the reforms.

The government, however, has also remained defiant, saying the reforms are necessary to comply with a \$4.2bn loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Calapucha said indigenous people reject the austerity measures, but their complaints go much further: They are demanding that the government stop all oil and mining in indigenous territory.

“We felt from the Amazon what was happening here in Quito and Guayaquil. That hurt us,” Calapucha said.

On Friday night, clashes began after police fired tear gas and pepper spray on a crowd of about 20,000 protesters in front of the National Assembly. The protesters had been rallying for hours, chanting anti-government slogans, with indigenous women singing and burning palo santo, a tree native to Ecuador, in front of the heavily guarded building.

By Saturday, the government and indigenous leaders announced they would begin talks to negotiate the details of the austerity measures. But protests continued, prompting Moreno to impose a curfew in the capital.

Excessive force

Protesters have accused security forces of using excessive force. At least five people have been killed, 800 severely wounded and more than 1,000 people arrested since the protests began, the state ombudsman said late on Friday.

Inocencio Tucumbi, an indigenous leader, was killed earlier this week when a tear gas canister fired by police hit his head, according to witnesses. The indigenous community honoured him by holding a mass procession and mass on Wednesday. They also detained eight police officers for several hours during the day, forcing them to witness the

mass, before releasing them to the United Nations officials in the evening.

The vast majority of those wounded have been in Quito, where police have been accused of firing tear gas and pepper spray near hospital entrances, as well the cultural centre and universities, where the more than 10,000 indigenous people have been sleeping. This includes pregnant women and small children.

“There has been an excessive use of tear gas, of which weighs a lot on the protesters, but also on the girls and women who are around,” says Monica Vega Puebla, legal accessor with the human rights organisation INREDH.

Government officials were not available for comment, but according to local media, Interior Minister Maria Paula Romo apologised for tear gas being fired at the universities, saying: “These are places where indigenous people are staying and have to remain safe places and they will be. These acts have no justification and will not be repeated.”

Romo, however, denied that there has been an overuse of force, and instead continuously pointing out the violent acts by protesters.

Calapucha said there were clashes with police in the Amazon city of Puyo, where she has been protesting since the uprising began last week, but it never reached the same level of violence as Quito.

For the Amazonian women and many indigenous people in Ecuador, this month's protests only highlight what they call years of repression by the government.

"We want a country where we don't have to live in fear that our lands will be destroyed, our rivers will be polluted, our forests will be cut down. Where we are never afraid of our children being discriminated against and excluded in their own lands," the Amazonian women said in their statement.

"Yes, we are angry," Calapucha added, but "this is how we chant: 'not one more bomb, not one more rock.'"

MEXICO: Study finds sex trafficking and child marriages linked

By Sebastien Malo

Reuters (11.05.2017) – <http://tmsnrt.rs/2q8HXJH> – Girls being trafficked for sex in northern Mexico often have been forced into exploitation as under-age child brides by their husbands, a study showed on Thursday.

Three out of four girls trafficked in the region were married at a young age, mostly before age 16, according to Mexican and U.S. researchers in a yet-unpublished study.

Human trafficking is believed to be the fastest-growing criminal industry in Mexico, and three-quarters of its victims are sexually exploited women and girls, according to Women United Against Trafficking, an activist group.

Under a 2012 anti-trafficking law, those convicted of the crime can spend up to 30 years in prison.

Nevertheless, nearly 380,000 people are believed to be enslaved in Mexico, according to the 2016 Global Slavery Index published by rights group Walk Free Foundation.

The researchers interviewed 603 women working in the sex industry in the Mexican cities of Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez, both along the border with the United States.

Most said they had been trafficked as under-age brides, often by their husbands, said Jay Silverman, the study's lead author and a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Diego.

In about half the cases, the brides were pregnant, so healthcare workers could play a critical role in thwarting sex trafficking, the researchers said.

"Within being provided pregnancy-related care, there's the opportunity of interviewing that girl to understand her situation," Silverman told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"We can support and assist those girls to reduce the likelihood that they will become trafficked," he said.

Under a 2014 law, the minimum age for marriage in Mexico is 18 but girls can marry at age 14 and boys at age 16 with parental consent.

The researchers include members of the United States-Mexico Border Health Commission, a joint effort launched in 2000 by the two nations' governments to improve health and quality of life along the border.

They also came from Mexican economic institutions, and one was a medical doctor.

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