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WORLD | LATIN AMERICA

Nicaragua Protesters Clash With Police

Social security tax increases sparked protests; at least 10 people dead over four days



Anti-government protesters pull down one of two metal sculptures known as the 'Trees of Life' in Managua, Nicaragua, on Saturday. PHOTO: ALFREDO ZUNIGA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By José de Córdoba

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Protests raged Saturday in Nicaragua, where at least 10 people have been killed during four days of clashes between police and demonstrators angry about social security tax increases pushed through by President Daniel Ortega.

Television footage showed protesters in the capital of Managua blocking streets and setting tires on fire as riot police confronted them with tear gas and rubber bullets. Demonstrators also knocked down "Trees of Life"—tall metal sculptures along the city's boulevards that light up at night, which were erected by Mr. Ortega's wife and Vice President Rosario Murillo, who is widely seen as the power behind the president.

The protests, started by university students but growing to include Nicaraguans from all walks of life, were unexpected as the Ortega administration has delivered economic growth and kept out the drug violence that has plagued Nicaragua's neighbors. But unease with the authoritarian nature of Mr. Ortega's presidency had been building for years, and the recent tax increases sparked widespread protests.

"Clearly there is a lot of pent-up frustration," said Eric Farnsworth, vice president of Washington think tank Americas Society/Council of the Americas. "The government has touted its social peace purchased at the cost of reduced civil liberties and democratic practices."

Local media reported 10 deaths since the protests started Wednesday, but human-rights group Cenidh told the Associated Press that it counted at least 25 deaths nationwide.

The United Nations called on Nicaragua to meet its international obligations to allow peaceful assembly and free speech, while the Organization of American States said it was following the protests with "preoccupation." At least 100 people have been injured, and troops have been deployed in several cities.

The demonstrations began after the passage of unpopular measures to rescue the social security system by raising taxes and cutting pension benefits.

Opponents say the Ortega government has mismanaged the social security system for years, using it as a piggy bank to finance housing projects developed by Mr. Ortega's allies.

The International Monetary Fund has warned that Nicaragua's social security system could run out of cash by 2019. "The authorities should act quickly to avoid a costly bailout of the system," the IMF said in a report last year.

In a rambling speech Saturday, Mr. Ortega said his government was ready to negotiate the social security overhaul with the country's leading business confederation COSEP, which has called for a peaceful demonstration for Monday.

"We call on the Nicaraguan people to preserve peace," said Mr. Ortega, a former Marxist revolutionary who was elected in 2016 to a third consecutive term in office.

But the influential business group said it won't engage in talks with the government until it ends its crackdown on the protests, releases demonstrators who had been detained and re-establishes media freedom.

Mr. Ortega has had friendly relations with the country's private sector. His government, helped with cheap oil supplies from Venezuela, has been able to deliver high economic growth to Nicaragua, one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere.

He has also been able to keep Nicaragua largely free from the widespread drug violence found in its northern neighbors of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

Critics say Mr. Ortega is attempting to establish a dynastic dictatorship like the one headed by Gen. Anastasio Somoza, which Mr. Ortega and his Sandinista guerrilla movement overthrew in 1979.

Since last week, university students, pensioners and opponents of Mr. Ortega, including many disgruntled former Sandinista comrades in arms, have taken to the streets. They have been confronted by police and crowds of young regime supporters known as "divine mobs," which Mr. Ortega's government has used in the past to repress dissent. In some cases, the protesters have responded with rocks and Molotov cocktails.

"No one suspected the rage was there," said one prominent businessman who asked not to be named for fear of reprisals. "On Friday, bank workers and employees of large companies who are normally very cautious took to the streets to protest."

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