Bolivia demonstrators announce 72-hour suspension of blockades

AFP – Supporters of former Bolivian president Evo Morales, who have been blocking roads in the center of the country for three weeks in a standoff with the government, on Wednesday announced a 72-hour "humanitarian" pause.
The protests began on October 14 after prosecutors charged Morales, who led the country from 2006 to 2019, with statutory rape over his alleged relationship with a 15-year-old girl while in office.

Morales says the charges, which he denies, were brought by the government of his former-ally-turned-rival President Luis Arce to prevent him making a political comeback.

The blockades have dealt a blow to the Bolivian economy and caused the prices of food and fuel to rocket.

"We are going to pause… for humanitarian reasons," Humberto Claros, general secretary of Bolivia's union of rural laborers, told Kawsachun Coca radio station, which is close to Morales.

Claros claimed that four demonstrators had been killed and "at least 100" others were injured in clashes with the security forces since the protests began.

The government denies any deaths during the clashes, saying that 127 people have been injured, 92 of them police officers, adding 180 arrests had been made.

Bolivia's ombudsman's office also told AFP it had received "no reports" of any deaths.

The announcement of the suspension of the blockades comes

after the security forces cleared several key roads leading from the central Cochabamba department, the country's breadbasket, to the capital La Paz and other cities in recent days.

"We have managed to reduce the blockades to the minimum," Interior Minister Eduardo Del Castillo told a press conference.

The Bolivian Highway Administration reported there were no remaining roadblocks in the country as of Wednesday night, after more than 20 had been reported during the peak of the protests.

Arce, who previously served as Morales's economics minister, said in a televised message that the plan to "unblock" the roads has worked.

Morales resigned under a cloud in 2019 after elections marked by fraud but is eyeing a comeback, despite being barred from seeking a fourth term.

On Friday, he went on hunger strike to press for dialogue with the government.

He also called for a temporary lifting of the blockades.

His mainly Indigenous supporters blocked access to the Cochabamba region to denounce what they called the "judicial persecution" of the 65-year-old.

But they are now also demanding that Arce, whom they hold responsible for an economic crisis that predated the protests, resign.

On Friday, the standoff took a dramatic turn when protesters besieged three army barracks in the central region of Chapare.

The government says they are holding around 200 soldiers hostage.

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