

Thousands protest new government in Mexico



MEXICO CITY (AP) — Tens of thousands of Mexicans surged into a downtown plaza Thursday in an angry protest over an economic crisis that threatens the pocketbooks of the poor and the credibility of

the new government.

"Down with capitalism!" the demonstrators chanted. "No to inflation!"

At least 30,000 people took part in the protest, the biggest since the peso was abruptly devalued by nearly a third beginning in late December, raising the specter of runaway inflation.

Groups representing labor unions, teachers, bus drivers, leftist political groups and others carried banners and chanted slogans denouncing the recent peso devaluation.

"Punish those responsible for the devaluation!" they shouted as they marched, jamming evening rush hour traffic for miles through downtown Mexico City.

There were no immediate reports of violence. Police did not intervene as the demonstrators massed on the capital's main plaza, known as the Zocalo.

The peso's abrupt slide began Dec. 20, capping a year of political turbulence marked by assassina-

tions and a guerrilla revolt that still smolders in the southern state of Chiapas. Since then, the peso has lost nearly 35 percent of its value, making imports more expensive.

An emergency economic plan worked out by government, businesses and labor leaders will hold wage increases to 7 percent for 1995. The government also is predicting inflation will reach an average rate of 15.9 percent in 1995, meaning a loss of purchasing power for most Mexicans.

"The devaluation is going to hurt us," said one demonstrator, teacher Juan Amanay, 35. "The people in the government are just looking after their own interests."

"Lower salaries mean our children won't have anything to eat," said housewife Juana Garcia, 51.

The poorest working Mexicans will get a 3 percent wage hike to soften the effect of the plan. Businesses, meanwhile, are to refrain from excessive price hikes.

Critics say there is little new in the plan, however, since the 7 percent salary cap had been agreed to previously, and the pledge for businesses to "mitigate" price hikes isn't mandatory.

The peso strengthened slightly Thursday after Mexico's new finance minister announced sobering new projections of low economic growth and briefed Wall Street on steps to combat the currency crisis.

Russians, Chechens trade fire in on going battle

GROZNY, Russia (AP) — Boris Yeltsin's promise to halt air attacks on Grozny was less than a day old when Russian fighter jets swooped over the ruined Chechen capital on Thursday and bombed the presidential palace.

Russians and Chechens traded heavy fire around Grozny's main train station, where burned-out tanks and bodies lay abandoned on the streets.

Warplanes also reportedly made bombing runs outside Grozny and heavy shelling pounded outlying villages as Moscow continued its fight to reassert control over the mostly Muslim, oil-rich southern republic.

The palace in the center of Grozny was hit by at least one rocket, touching off a fire in the upper stories of the tall concrete building, said Western journalists who witnessed the attack.

Only the basement and first floor of the palace were occupied — by Chechen defenders and wounded from both sides. Witnesses said there appeared to be no casualties. Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev was reportedly in a bunker elsewhere in the city.

It was the third air strike of the day on Grozny. Comparatively, however, Thursday's attacks were light, perhaps hampered by the fog that blanketed the city.

Rocket and gun fire rattled the railway station, but clashes were far less intense than in recent days.

Chechen fighters strolled freely through central Grozny on the sixth day of Russia's bungled offensive to take the city and quash the republic's 3-year-old independence drive.

Yeltsin's promise on Wednesday to stop the bombing was his second of the Chechen campaign — and the second to be followed by air strikes the next day. Last time, warplanes destroyed much of downtown Grozny, including an orphanage.

But with dissension spreading in the Russian army over the military debacle, it was difficult to determine whether Yeltsin approved Thursday's air strikes.

Yeltsin ordered the bombing halt in the face of growing criticism at home and abroad of his heavy-handed offensive.

Hundreds, perhaps thou-

sands, of civilians and fighters have been killed or wounded in the 3-week-old invasion. The Red Cross estimates 350,000 people are now refugees.

The war grew even uglier after Russia failed to take the capital in a New Year's Eve tank assault and was humiliated by out-gunned but spirited Chechen defenders, who drove the Russian troops from the center of the city.

Russian warplanes dropped cluster bombs packed with shrapnel on several villages.

In Shali, 16 miles from Grozny, they bombed a roadside market Tuesday, then struck again as people were helping the wounded. An hour later, they hit the maternity ward of the local hospital. Estimates of the death toll in Shali ranged as high as 100 dead with scores more wounded.

Russia's human rights commissioner, Sergei Kovalyov, arrived in Moscow from Grozny on Thursday accusing his government of "ruthless" and "massive" human rights violations.

Yeltsin is also under intense criticism from foreign governments.

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