

Bolivians to protest gas export route in effort to oust leaders

Student, labor and leftist groups will protest in Bolivia today over proposed gas exportation through Chile

By Tyler Bridges
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

LA PAZ, Bolivia — Leftist unions, university students and farm labor Indians will attempt to shut down Bolivia Monday by rallying opposition to the government's desire to export huge gas reserves through the country's hated enemy, Chile.

They ultimately hope to use the gas controversy to topple the government of President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, who has a tenuous hold on power.

The debate over whether the gas will travel through Chile has convulsed La Paz and its environs over the past 10 days, with opponents blocking highways into the capital and provoking one confrontation that left six dead.

If Sanchez de Lozada chooses the route through Chile — he has said he will decide by December — "the government could fall," Bolivian political analyst Carlos Torranzo said. "Gas has become a catalyst for all of the grievances."

The stakes are so large because government officials and private analysts say exporting Bolivia's huge gas reserves through Chile is the only feasible route for a \$5 billion project that they say offers the best hope for reducing hunger and creating jobs in this impoverished nation.

But opponents — Marxist workers and students, anti-government farm labor Indians and anti-free traders — say the gas must not be exported through Chile, which is hated for having annexed Bolivia's only access to the ocean after an 1879 battle between the two countries.

Worsening matters, the gas would be sent through the northern Chilean port of Patillos, which once belonged to Bolivia.

"Chile is our enemy," Leonardo Huayta, who owns a tiny food store outside of La Paz, said. "We'll fight to the death that it not go through Chile."

Bolivians have been unable to let go of their antagonism of Chile because losing their access coastline was probably the biggest defeat ever suffered in a country that has enjoyed few victories.

Schools teach children that a cowardly Chile stole Bolivia's coastline, although most historians blame the inept general running the country at the time.

Ever since, military recruits have taken an oath to defend the country with the phrase, "Long Live Bolivia! Death to Chile!"

Exacerbating the debate is Bolivia's history of being exploited by foreigners, beginning with Spanish colonizers in the 17th century sending home the riches of the Potosi silver mines.

That the gas reserves exist in a part of Bolivia known as the Chaco hasn't helped the government's position.

A 1932-35 war against Paraguay for control of the Chaco killed 60,000 Bolivians, most of whom were Indians from the highlands.

"Our fathers and grandfathers died to protect that land," Felipe Quispe, an Aymara Indian and member of Congress who is one of the government's two main opponents, said in an interview. "The gas belongs to Bolivia."

Quispe spoke Saturday following a two-hour session where 500 Indians in the midst of an anti-government hunger strike rallied against the government while three government officials stoically sat on a stage taking it in.

Tensions ran so high that three Chilean journalists had to be hustled out of the auditorium before farm laborers attacked them.

"We should use the gas to industrialize Bolivia," Quispe said in the interview. "Once the country is industrialized, we can sell it abroad."

Under the plan awaiting govern-

ment approval, Bolivia's gas would be sent via Mexico to California, which is another sore spot among opponents, who continue to nurse virulent anti-American feelings.

The gas debate comes at a time of rising anti-government feelings. Riots in February left 30 dead and forced Sanchez de Lozada to flee the presidential palace for his safety.

After 15 years of modest growth, Bolivia's economy has been stagnant for the past four years after promises that privatizing state companies during the 1990s would mean better lives for the poor. The gap between the haves and the have-nots seems to be widening.

"The people don't see results," Alvaro Garcia, a sociologist who serves as an intellectual theorist for the left, said. "There's no work, there's no money, there are no jobs and there's no money coming in. There's enormous discontent."

Three foreign companies — British Gas, Repsol-YPF of Spain and Pan American Energy — own the reserves and would build oil pipelines and the plant in Chile where the gas would be liquefied. Tankers would ship the liquid gas to a regasification plant in northwest Mexico. From there, it would be sent to California energy producers.

Shipping the gas from Bolivia to a port in Peru has been suggested as a politically palatable alternative to Chile. But it would increase the project's cost by \$1 billion and is thus unfeasible economically, officials from the oil companies have said.

Bolivian officials have said that once the pipeline is fully functional in 2008, exports would nearly double, and the government would receive an additional \$300 million a year.

"If we don't do this, Bolivia will remain a poor country," Juan Cariaga, a former finance minister who is a private business consultant, said.

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5:00-5:50	Stretch & Flex Megan	Body Sculpt Megan	Stretch & Flex Megan	Body Sculpt Megan	
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