

Mexico police and teachers clash ahead of polls

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OAXACA, Mexico (Reuters) - Thousands of Mexican police firing tear gas fought a running battle with striking teachers in a southern city on Wednesday in the latest violence between protesters and security forces before July elections.

Backed up by a helicopter clattering overhead, police on foot briefly dislodged teachers from the main square in the city of Oaxaca where they had been camped for three weeks demanding higher wages.

Witnesses and press reports said shots were fired during clashes in downtown streets. One policeman was shot in the leg before the teachers retook the square, popular with tourists visiting the picturesque city.

State Gov. Ulises Ruiz denied a report by the teachers' union that police had killed three or four people and then taken away the bodies.

"They should tell us where they are because no policeman knows anything about this and no hospital has it registered. I think this is another lie," he told a radio station.

The incident, and others, have fanned tension in the run-up to the July 2 presidential vote, a close battle between leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and conservative Felipe Calderon.

Oaxaca is the highland capital of the southern state of the same name which is run by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, running third in the presidential race.

The 40,000 teachers vowed to continue the strike, and have threatened to disrupt voting in Oaxaca for the presidential election. This week they blocked employee access to the state office of the Federal Electoral Institute.

Interior Minister Carlos Abascal said late on Wednesday that authorities had "no new plans to use force" to end the protest, and invited teachers' leaders and Gov. Ruiz to take part in talks on Thursday morning to resolve the conflict.

Television news showed images of police officers clearing tents, rocks and debris from the colonial city's central square, after it had been temporarily abandoned by protesters

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LEFTIST URGES DIALOGUE

Lopez Obrador, often accused by conservatives of being a populist rabble rouser, called for dialogue.

"It's best to avoid conflict, like in medicine it's best to use preventive medicine," he said in the border city of Tijuana. "Yes to dialogue, yes to agreement, yes to negotiation," he told a rally.

In May, police put down riots in San Salvador de Atenco, a town near Mexico City. Demonstrators, opposed to efforts to evict illegal flower vendors, had attacked and abducted police officers. Two protesters died in the crackdown.

Two steel workers were killed in April in battles with police sent in to break up a strike, part of a long and bitter work stoppage by miners and metal workers nationwide.

President Vicente Fox's spokesman Ruben Aguilar said the upheaval in Oaxaca, like the previous trouble, was not a sign of instability around the presidential vote.

"In no way does the government consider them hot spots or insoluble problems, much less do they put at risk the electoral process," he told reporters.

Enrique Rueda Pacheco, head of the teachers' union, told local radio: "We must resist, we are used to ... years of struggle and to the repressive government."