

Protesters-army fight brewing in Mexico

Supporters of presidential candidate Manuel Andrés López Obrador pledged to stay on the same Mexico City streets where Independence Day celebrations will be held next month.

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MEXICO CITY - A potentially dangerous confrontation between the Mexican army and thousands of protesters loomed larger Tuesday as federal officials insisted on holding annual Independence Day celebrations on the same streets occupied for weeks by supporters of the leftist presidential candidate.

Both sides expressed defiance, refusing to give up their claim to the heart of Mexico's capital.

Mexicans celebrate their independence from Spain every year with cries of "Viva México!" on the night of Sept. 15, as the president rings a bell from a balcony of the National Palace as multitudes gather in the central square, or Zócalo. The next day, the Mexican army assembles in the square and marches down wide Reforma Avenue, to the cheers of thousands of families.

This year, the celebrations will be impossible unless protest camps are cleared. City police, who answer to the new mayor, an ally of leftist candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador, have so far been unwilling to do that, and the federal police have declined to intervene.

Gerardo Fernández, a spokesman for López Obrador's Democratic Revolution Party, said Tuesday that the protesters won't move for the soldiers or President Vicente Fox, whose ruling party candidate and contested winner, Felipe Calderón, appears increasingly likely to come out ahead when Mexico's top electoral court certifies the winner of the July 2 election.

"They are not going to intimidate us," Fernández said. "We are solid in our decision not to allow the imposition of an illegitimate president."

Fox's spokesman, Rubén Aguilar, insisted that "there will be celebrations on Sept. 15 and 16 as there always have been," despite the protesters' vows to stay.

The Federal Electoral Tribunal has until Aug. 31 to reveal the findings of its partial recount and to resolve all other electoral disputes. By Sept. 6 it must either declare a president-elect or annul the election.

López Obrador, however, has called on his supporters to keep demonstrating for years if they have to, starting with large-scale protests at the Congress on Sept. 1, when Fox delivers his final state-of-the-nation address there.

On Tuesday, federal police erected steel barriers around the Congress buildings after the most violent episode yet.

About eight protesters, including at least two Democratic Revolution lawmakers, were injured Monday as they tried to set up camp at the door of Congress. Federal police were filmed beating the protesters. Some responded by throwing stones. Police fired back with tear gas. One lawmaker was led away with a bloody head; another said his rib was fractured.

"This is a message to intimidate us, but we are not cowards, Mr. President," López Obrador told a rally later. "We won't allow ourselves to be provoked" into violence.

But the federal police chief, Eduardo Medina Mora, defended his officers.

"I don't see that there was any act of repression here, I see operational procedure," said Mora. "We regret the confrontations, but if they are inevitable then that's just the way it is. It has to be done."