

Protest leader arrested in Mexico City

Flavio Sosa, the leader of protests that paralyzed the city of Oaxaca, was arrested after going to Mexico City to discuss a solution.

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OAXACA, Mexico - Police arrested the symbolic leader of a six-month protest movement that took over the southern city of Oaxaca and left at least nine dead, hours after he said at a news conference in Mexico City that he had gone to the capital to negotiate a peaceful solution.

Flavio Sosa, whose heavyset, bearded presence became an emblem of the leftist Oaxaca People's Assembly, was arrested late Monday on charges related to the barricades, vandalism and irregular detentions carried out by some protesters.

"Sosa . . . is known for his use of violence, damaging private property and public byways, and also burning vehicles and buildings," federal prosecutors said. Sosa was charged with kidnapping, robbery, causing damages and injuries and taken to a maximum security prison just west of Mexico City that holds some of the nation's most dangerous prisoners.

Leaders of the Oaxaca People's Assembly, or APPO, have vowed to keep pressing for Gov. Ulises Ruiz's resignation and called for a "mega-march" Saturday to demand the release of Sosa and other protesters even as life there returns to normal after burned-out vehicles and improvised barricades were removed from the streets.

Some residents warn that simmering discontent about poverty, injustice and oppression could erupt into violence again at any time.

Tomás Basaldú, Oaxacan state leader of Mexico's leftist Democratic Revolution Party, said he was meeting with the protesters.

"We will take action in the next few days," he said. "We won't lower our guard in backing the protesters."

The conflict began in late May as a strike by teachers seeking higher pay, but quickly exploded into a broader movement including Indian groups, students, farmers and myriad left-leaning activists claiming Ruiz rigged his electoral victory and has repressed opponents.

The conflict kept residents away from the city's historic center and forced nearly all the shops and restaurants to close their doors. Former President Vicente Fox in late October sent in federal troops, who cleared protesters from the streets.

Located about 325 miles southeast of Mexico City and featuring colonial architecture and Indian crafts, Oaxaca is one of the country's premier tourist spots. But tourism plummeted amid the violence, which prompted the U.S. and several other foreign governments to warn their citizens against traveling to the city.