

Protests mar Bolivian reform efforts

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LA PAZ, Bolivia --

Violent protests have prompted an assembly rewriting Bolivia's constitution to call a monthlong recess in hopes of rescuing the new charter, one of President Evo Morales' central reforms.

Constituent Assembly President Sylvia Lazarte announced the break Friday night from the capital La Paz, saying it was no longer safe for delegates to walk the streets of Sucre, the southern city where the assembly meets.

Protesters demanding the relocation of Bolivia's capital have threatened to shutter the assembly, convened by President Evo Morales to draw up a new framework granting greater voice to the country's indigenous majority.

Over the last week a small group of university students have repeatedly clashed with police, burning tires and trying to seize the historic theater housing the assembly.

"I call on all our brothers and sisters, in all of civil society, in the country and the city, to reflect in order to find a solution," Lazarte said. "We constitutional delegates do not want to be victims of the capital issue."

Morales backers hold a slim majority in the 255-seat assembly, which has haggled for a year over Bolivia's future without agreeing on a single article of the new constitution. But with a Dec. 14 deadline for a draft quickly approaching, the delegates now find themselves frozen in their tracks over a historical grudge.

Sucre, the site of Bolivia's 1825 founding and its first capital, is home to the nation's highest courts. But the picturesque colonial city is now demanding the return of the executive and legislative branches it lost to La Paz in a brief 1899 civil war, hoping the government seat will bring economic development.