

# Locals retake Bolivia airport from army

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SANTA CRUZ, Bolivia --

Armed with clubs and waving provincial flags, thousands of residents of Bolivia's wealthiest province seized control of the country's busiest airport Friday from troops sent in by President Evo Morales.

The retaking of the airport was a victory for leaders of a province fighting for greater autonomy from the socialist central government.

Soldiers and military police melted away before the protesters flooded into Santa Cruz's Viru Viru airport, avoiding clashes. It was not immediately clear if the troops had left the airport entirely or withdrawn to a distant part of the facility.

Morales ordered 220 troops to take control of the airport Thursday after workers threatened to block flights that did not pay landing fees to local officials rather than the national airport authority. Among the carriers affected was American Airlines.

The dispute quickly became a flashpoint between Bolivia's national government and a region seeking greater autonomy.

At least two soldiers were wounded Thursday, one by gunfire, and local hospitals reported that about 20 other people were injured, some by tear gas fired by troops to repel protesters shouting, "The airport belongs to Santa Cruz!"

Santa Cruz Gov. Ruben Costas called on residents Friday to retake the airport and thousands responded, marching past startled passengers into the terminal and waving clubs and green-and-white Santa Cruz flags.

The soldiers left "with their tails between their legs," Costas said.

Planes continued to land and take off Friday, though passengers who had boarded one flight had to disembark because the air traffic controllers brought in with the troops had left and the returning old controllers were not yet back.

The flight left later in the day and the head of the local airport authority said operations were back to normal.

Morales' top aide, Juan Ramon Quintana, called the seizure of the airport "a defeat for the people of Santa Cruz and the people of Bolivia." But the government appeared to accept the airport's return to local control, and said it hoped local officials would root out the corruption it said was marring operations at the airport.

Morales said he sent in troops because airport workers demanded air crews pay up to \$2,000 in cash as an alternative to landing fees paid to the national airport authority.

"Preserving the good image of the airports is an obligation," Morales said. "Virus Virus was doing poorly, making illegal charges."

Among the carriers affected was American Airlines, which canceled two flights through Santa Cruz on Wednesday and one on Thursday, as well as flying a plane out empty of passengers on Tuesday. The airline, a unit of Dallas-based AMR Corp., said it was back to its normal two flights through San Cruz on Friday.

The airport conflict has broad political implications because Santa Cruz, the nation's largest and wealthiest province, has resisted Morales' efforts to nationalize industries and redistribute land and wealth to Bolivia's poor majority.

Santa Cruz leaders want autonomy from La Paz and a bigger share of their state's natural gas revenues, but Morales needs the cash for other, desperately poor parts of the country.

Among those stranded for awhile by the crisis was Norman F. Mydske, the Latin America director of the Billy Graham Evangelical Association, who had been trying to catch a connection to Cochabamba, Bolivia's central city, since Tuesday.

"I pray everything goes well," he said.