

# Bolivian Airport Is Wrested From Government Troops

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SANTA CRUZ, [Bolivia](#), Oct. 19 (AP) — Armed with clubs and waving provincial flags, thousands of residents of Bolivia's wealthiest province seized control of the country's busiest airport on Friday from troops sent in by President Evo Morales.

The retaking of the airport was a victory for leaders of Santa Cruz Province, who are clamoring for greater autonomy from the socialist central government.

Soldiers and military police officers melted away before the protesters flooded into Viru Viru Airport, avoiding clashes. It was not immediately clear whether the troops had left the airport or had withdrawn to a distant part of the facility.

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

The dispute quickly became a flashpoint between Bolivia's national government and the provincial government.

The airport conflict has broad political implications because Santa Cruz has resisted Mr. Morales's efforts to nationalize industries and redistribute land and wealth to Bolivia's poor majority.

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

Gov. Rubén Costas of Santa Cruz called on residents on Friday to retake the airport. Thousands marched past startled passengers into the terminal, waving clubs and green-and-white Santa Cruz flags. The soldiers left "with their tails between their legs," Mr. Costas said.

Planes continued to land and take off Friday, and the head of the local airport authority said operations were back to normal.

Mr. Morales's top aide, Juan Ramón 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 end the corruption it said was marring operations there.

Mr. Morales said he had 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.

American Airlines 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 said it was back to its normal two flights through Santa Cruz on Friday.

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

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