

# Bolivian violence alarms U.S.

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WASHINGTON --

Alarmed by a growing tide of violence in Bolivia, the State Department on Monday condemned the deaths of three protesters this weekend and urged both the government and opposition to refrain from fueling tensions.

The three died Sunday in Sucre, in south-central Bolivia, and hundreds were hurt in clashes between security forces and protesters opposed to government proposals for constitutional changes.

Bolivian President Evo Morales, a leftist closely allied with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, has blamed his conservative rivals for the deaths as political tensions escalate before a Dec. 15 deadline to draft a new constitution.

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said the United States deplored the violence.

'Democratic governments have a responsibility to protect their citizens' rights to freedom of expression,' he said in a prepared statement. 'We urge the Bolivian government and the opposition to show restraint and tolerance during this critical period. An environment that encourages inclusion and open debate is vital to the success of any democratic reform process.'

Relations between Washington and La Paz have become more strained in recent months as Morales and other top Bolivian government officials have stepped up their criticism of U.S. actions and accused U.S. Ambassador to Bolivia Philip Goldberg of seeking to destabilize the government.

Washington has denied the accusation and refrained from taking sides in the constitutional debate.