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## Argentine farm protest enters third week

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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina --

Striking farmers built new highway blockades around Argentina's agricultural heartland Wednesday in a standoff with the president over tax increases on major export crops.

The nationwide farm and ranch strike headed into a third week, all but paralyzing one of the leading world exporters of soybeans, beef and wheat. There were no reports of major violence despite tension and fisticuffs at one barricade and huge traffic jams elsewhere.

Demonstrators held a second straight night of noisy pot-banging protests late Wednesday, rallying in the hundreds outside the downtown Government House and the suburban presidential residence. The downtown demonstration melted away quickly after a similar-size crowd of counter-protesters arrived waving flags in support of President Cristina Fernandez.

Television footage showed scattered fistfights between rival bands, with three people slightly injured. One man was spotted leaving the demonstrations with his face bloodied after he was reportedly hit by a pot thrown by a rival demonstrators.

The strike by farmers against the government decree, which raises taxes on soybean exports from 35 percent to 45 percent and slaps new taxes on other farm exports, has led to shortages of beef, milk, cooking oil and other products on supermarket shelves in Argentina.

Fernandez's ruling center-left coalition, which controls both houses of Congress, passed a resolution in the Senate supporting tax hikes and urging strikers to call off the 14-day-old protest. A similar proposal was expected to sail through the House.

Earlier, farmers rumbled in a convoy of tractors through the central city of Cordoba and laid sharp spikes across a key trucking route through farmland in Buenos Aires province. Long-distance bus companies scrapped service as more demonstration gauntlets went up in six provinces.

Fernandez has angrily refused to roll back new export taxes, facing down angry farmers as aides warned police could forcibly free up highway transit, arresting anyone who resists.

In a nationally televised address on Tuesday, Fernandez rejected any rollback of the March 11 decree.

Fernandez chided strikers and said rich "oligarchs" benefited the most from a recent boom in world commodity prices, though she wanted to redistribute some of their wealth to those less fortunate.

The tough words only hardened the resolve of protesters.

"This country is fed up with taxes. Where does the tax money go?" retired flight attendant Karina Sagemuner said outside the president's Olivos residence. "What they are doing to the farmers is shameful by confiscating their money."

The president's speech also drew an unexpected new player into the crisis confronting a three-month-old administration: thousands of middle class Argentines, who took to the streets Tuesday night to support the farmers.

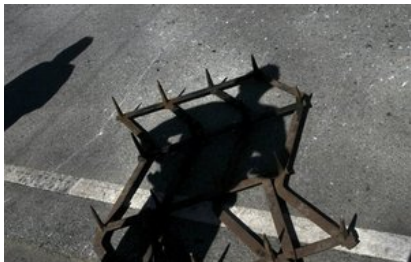
Argentines complain high inflation and taxes are universal problems still unanswered in Argentina despite a robust recovery from a 2002 economic meltdown.

The country's last major pot-banging protests, called "cacerolazos" in Spanish, helped bring down the government of President Fernando de la Rúa during the December 2001 prelude to Argentina's economic free fall.



Natacha Pisarenko / AP Photo

A government supporter, holding up a banner that reads in Spanish " You are on a strike against all the Argentines", demonstrate against farmers in Buenos Aires's Plaza de Mayo, Wednesday, March 26, 2008. Large protests rang through Argentine cities for the first time in years after Argentina's President Cristina Fernandez rejected negotiations with farmers and ranchers over increased export taxes on agricultural goods.



Pablo Aneli / AP Photo

The shadows of farmers are seen at a roadblock in Tandil, Argentina, Wednesday, March 26, 2008. Large protests rang through Argentine cities for the first time in years after Argentina's President Cristina Fernandez rejected negotiations with farmers and ranchers over increased export taxes on agricultural goods. Protests led to shortages of food in some areas of Buenos Aires.