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Argentine farmers return to barricades

By Bill Cormier

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BUENOS AIRES --

Farmers chafing at export taxes on their crops set up new blockades of rural highways on Saturday after talks failed to end a dispute that has halted grain exports and emptied supermarket shelves of meat.

Eduardo Buzzi, a leader of one of four striking farm groups, said a marathon round of negotiations that ended early Saturday failed to yield a breakthrough and that farmers might not attend the next round of talks called by the government to start on Monday.

"We went to negotiate and it turned out that the dialogue consisted of talking in vague generalities," Buzzi told Argentine Radio 10. "As such we doubt there will be a meeting on Monday."

On Saturday, farmworkers resumed highway blockades in four rural provinces -- Entre Rios, Cordoba, Santa Fe and Chaco. The move came a day after farmers called a "truce" and temporarily lifted barricades to allow bargaining to begin on disputed tax hikes.

Small farmers are protesting that they have been unfairly hit by a March 11 presidential decree that hiked export taxes on soybeans from 35 percent to as much as 45 percent, and slapped new duties on other farm exports. President Kristina Fernández says the measure is intended to help stem rising inflation.

For more than two weeks, the farmers have led road blockades that choked off the flow of farm goods to major cities, emptying supermarket shelves and virtually paralyzing exports of beef, soybeans and wheat from this agricultural powerhouse.

Recently, Fernández sounded more conciliatory, defusing days of bitter recriminations by shaking hands with farm leaders at Government House when they opened their first talks late Friday.

But negotiations ended past midnight Saturday without an agreement. Fernández's top aide told reporters the dialogue would continue on Monday.

"We have had our first encounter with Argentina's farm leadership. I believe the talks were highly useful," said Cabinet chief Alberto Fernández, who is not related to the president. We have been able to speak after 16 days of missed encounters and silence.

On March 13, the growers launched their strike, burning tires, marching through the capital banging pots noisily and using trucks and tractors to erect highway barricades across the heartland.

The hardline Agrarian Federation group, which had operated one of the biggest barricades, announced after the talks broke off Saturday that it would be among the first to restart the barricades.

"Those in favor of blockading the route, raise your hands!" Alfredo De Angelis, leader shouted to gathered farmers. They overwhelmingly signaled their willingness to resume the blockade in Entre Rios province northeast of Buenos Aires.



NATACHA PISARENKO / AP PHOTO

A woman collects rotten vegetables outside a fruit market in Buenos Aires Saturday. During a five-hours truce with the government, farmers on strike lifted the blockades Friday night and allowed trucks with food to go on their trip. But after a 17-day strike most of the goods rotted.