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Protester killed in Peru during rally against Southern Copper project

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By Mitra Taj and Marco Aquino

AREQUIPA/LIMA, PERU (Reuters) - Clashes between police and opponents of Southern Copper Corp's Tia Maria project in Peru left one protester dead on Wednesday as rallies calling for its cancellation spread in the region.

Protesters, mainly farmers who grow crops for export, say they fear the proposed $1.4 billion mine will pollute nearby agricultural valleys in Peru's southern region of Arequipa. Tia Maria has been stalled since 2011 after three protesters died in similar rallies.

The latest fatality was a 61-year-old man who died in hospital at the town of Mollendo, after succumbing to injuries suffered at a rally, said Walter Vera, the director of Islay province's health network.

Several other protesters were wounded during clashes with police in the province, said Helar Valencia, a local mayor and opponent of the Tia Maria project.

The project was poised to get off the ground this year after the government approved its revised environmental impact study in August 2014 and a construction permit was pending.

But the resurgence of demonstrations over the past month has threatened to further delay the project, which is expected to add 120,000 tonnes of copper to the company's annual output.

Southern Copper has said it will continue to work toward bringing Tia Maria to fruition, retracting statements by a local spokesman last month that it would nix the project because of the protests.

Demonstrations on Wednesday were scattered throughout the region of Arequipa.

Unions, university students and local political groups marched in the regional capital, Arequipa, while farmers rallied in surrounding valleys.

"Yes to agriculture! No to mining!" hundreds of protesters chanted in the main square of the city of Arequipa, where the rallies were largely peaceful and businesses remained open.

Organizers said the demonstrations on Wednesday were the biggest so far, with tens of thousands turning out across the region.

President Ollanta Humala has defended Tia Maria and urged its detractors to give it a chance.

But talks earlier this week between his government and the project's opponents yielded no agreement.

"The solution is to cancel the project," said Jesus Cornejo, the head of a farmers' group in the Tambo Valley. "No matter what they say we know it will hurt agriculture."

Southern Copper, controlled by Grupo Mexico, modified its original project to allay those concerns and agreed to build a desalinization plant.

Conflicts over mining projects in Peru, the world's third-biggest copper producer, have held up billions in investment in recent years.

(Reporting By Mitra Taj in Arequipa and Marco Aquino in Lima,; Editing by Cynthia Osterman and Simon Cameron-Moore)