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Peru natural gas protests leave at least one dead, dozens injured

2:39pm EST

LIMA (Reuters) - At least one person was killed and dozens injured in protests against natural gas exploration in a Peruvian jungle town, authorities and leaders said on Wednesday.

Violence broke out after protesters in the town of Pichanaki, 270 km (165 miles) east of Lima, tried to seize a police station and military barracks late on Tuesday, said Jose Luis Alvarez, a senior official in Peru's Cabinet.

"Obviously there was a reaction to dissuade the protesters and that produced this unfortunate result," Alvarez said on local broadcaster RPP.

Protesters demanding that Argentine energy company Pluspetrol leave the remote jungle region broke into Pluspetrol facilities on military land, destroying two tents and taking a water pump, the army said.

The Interior Ministry said a 22-year-old man died after apparently being shot and that at least 37 civilians and 38 police officers were injured. It said the police did not carry firearms.

But an organizer of the protest, Carlos Echevarria, said three protesters had been killed after police fired live bullets into crowds.

Clashes with police continued on Wednesday, with more locals joining street demonstrations, said Echevarria, who heads an activist group.

"The situation is really bad here," he said by telephone.

Government officials were headed to the area to ease tensions, said Alvarez, who addresses social unrest as the Cabinet's High Commissioner for Dialogue.

Pluspetrol said it will continue to seek dialogue with opponents, adding that its exploratory activities have not resulted in any wells being drilled and satisfy all environmental laws.

"The company regrets this act of violence against the Pichanaki army barracks," Pluspetrol said in a statement.

The protesters are primarily farmers who fear pollution from energy development in Peru's southern region of Junin, said Echevarria.

"There is nothing to negotiate, we simply want the company to leave," he added.

Peru, rich in natural gas, is rife with conflicts over land rights and environmental concerns.

Pluspetrol is also struggling to end disputes in Peru's northern jungle region of Loreto, where indigenous protesters have taken control of 14 oil wells and halted 3,100 barrels of output per day in the country's biggest oil block.

(Reporting by Mitra Taj and Marco Aquino; editing by W Simon and G Crosse)

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