



La Paz Sin Paz: Violent Protests, Mass Resignations, and Embassy Departure Status



Summary

Following the release of the Organization of American States (OAS) election audit on November 10, Bolivian President Evo Morales announced his resignation in a press conference from Chimore, Cochabamba. The audit found “[clear manipulation](#)” of election results, including physical records with alterations and forged signatures, and evidence of wide-scale data manipulation. The next day, Morales tweeted that he was en route to Mexico, thanking Mexican President Lopez Obrador for [granting him asylum](#) and vowing to return to Bolivia with “more strength and energy.” His resignation prompted that of Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera, six ministers, three Movement to Socialism (MAS) ruling party governors, several MAS senators and mayors, and the Vice Foreign Minister. The mass resignations were met with both jubilation from the anti-Evo camps and protest from the pro-MAS groups.

The security and political environment resulting from the past days’ events is chaotic and uncertain. There are recurring demonstrations, strikes, roadblocks, and marches in major cities across Bolivia, centered on city plazas and major thoroughfares. Roadblocks and strikes have cut off traffic on main avenues, highways between cities, and airport access. There are also reports of sporadic violence, and local authorities have used crowd control measures to discourage protests.

In response to the changing environment, the U.S. Embassy in La Paz has ordered the departure of all



Morales en route to Mexico City

eligible family members and authorized departure for non-emergency Embassy personnel. The U.S. Department of State has updated the [Travel Advisory](#) for Bolivia to a Level 4, including travelers should not travel due to increased incidence of violence and civil unrest, in addition to the limited capabilities of the drawn-down Embassy. Travelers to Bolivia should remain vigilant, avoid road barricades and large gatherings, and follow U.S. Embassy guidance and security updates. The U.S. government has limited ability to provide emergency services to U.S. citizens in some areas of Bolivia, and local police may lack the resources to respond effectively to serious criminal incidents. Emergency response, including ambulance service, is limited or non-existent, especially during periods of significant civil unrest when roads around the hospital may be blocked.

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Evo Morales Resigns, Seeks Asylum in Mexico City, and Leaves Power Vacuum in His Wake

In a post-audit press conference, Morales called for [new elections](#) and a new Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE). Joined by Vice President Garcia Linera and Minister of Health Gabriela Montano, Morales then blamed opposition leader Carlos Mesa and Pro Santa Cruz Civic Committee leader Luis Fernando Camacho for the ongoing protest-related violence. He then explained that he was resigning to “stop the violence,” claiming that he was subject to what he called a “[coup](#).” Vice President Garcia then provided his resignation reiterating Morales’s rhetoric about a coup against the MAS government.

On Tuesday morning, Morales arrived in Mexico, where the Mexican government granted him political asylum. Mexican Foreign Minister Marcel Ebrard cited “[humanitarian reasons](#)” as the reasoning for offering asylum. In an audio recording, Morales suggests that his exile would be brief, and that he will “return [to Bolivia] soon with strength.”

Bolivia now faces a [power vacuum](#), as lawmakers in La Paz scramble to place together an interim government in the wake of pro-Morales resignations. The resignations happened so quickly and in such mass, that social media became flooded with memes regarding “resignation bingo.” In addition to resignations listed previously, the following officials have since resigned from office: ministers of hydrocarbons, communication, mining, planning, culture and tourism, sports; vice ministers of foreign affairs, civilian security, culture, treasury and public finance; governors of Cochabamba, Potosi, and Oruro; mayors of Oruro, Potosi, and Sucre; five MAS senators and deputies as well as two new MAS senators elected on October 20; and the president and vice president of the TSE. The Attorney General’s office has also since instructed the La Paz Attorney General to [prosecute](#) the members of the TSE accused of participation in election fraud.

The resignations of the president, vice president, and presidents of both houses of the national assembly – all constitutionally mandated leadership positions – have left Bolivia’s leadership undetermined. **The subsequent resignations of several other leaders have completely exhausted the country’s chain of succession**, should the MAS accept the resignations. The National Assembly must now appoint an acting president until the country can hold new elections. The National Assembly was to convene on Tuesday, November 12, but suspended the session due to the inability of members to travel amid ongoing protests.

According to the constitution, Bolivia will have 90 days to hold its next elections, which would be on or around February 9, 2020. Bolivia is also scheduled to hold subnational elections for all nine governors and 340 mayors in March 2020. Achieving a quorum may prove difficult, as protest activity currently limits travel to La Paz. Additionally, MAS lawmakers, who currently comprise a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, may delay proceedings.

Who is the Acting President?

In theory, the interim presidency would fall to Second Vice President of the Senate Jeanine Añez. Añez belongs to an opposition party and has not resigned office. However, due to her political alliance in the opposition, it is unlikely that she will enjoy support from the pro-MAS population.

Chaos in the Streets Indicative of Increasing Insecurity

Following Evo's resignation, major cities throughout the country experienced significant incidents of [looting and vandalism](#). In the immediate aftermath of the press conference, triumphant Anti-Morales demonstrators filled the streets, with some groups ransacking and vandalizing MAS houses. Looters stormed [President Morales's house](#) in Cochabamba, vandalizing the walls and windows. In Zona Sur, home to many U.S. expatriates, residents honked horns and set off fireworks in support of the resignations. Many protestors gathered at Plaza Murillo, the seat of government, to accompany Luis Fernando Camacho in presenting Morales's letter of resignation.

Later in the evening, the security environment deteriorated into what local media is calling "[a night of terror](#)." MAS supporters took to the streets in La Paz and El Alto with their own [vandalizing and looting](#). In El Alto, looters stormed and pillaged the Sofia chicken factory; similarly, the famous El Ceibo chocolate factory [burned down](#). Large groups of MAS supporters from Chasquipampa looted pharmacies, destroyed storefronts, and set fire to houses, gas stations, and a police station in [Zona Sur](#). Pro-Morales protestors also burned a fleet of La Paz city buses. Rioters targeted and burned houses of opposition activists. Some [news sources](#) reported that pro-Morales protestors armed with sticks descended on La Paz from nearby towns shouting, "Here we go, civil war."



At least 33 city buses burned overnight

The lack of police response and the limits of policing capabilities have concerned some citizens that security forces will be unable to maintain control of the streets. Police officers stationed at the presidential palace in La Paz reportedly abandoned their posts and joined protestors on Saturday. By Sunday, both the chief of the armed forces and the chief of police [recommended that Morales resign](#); the chief of the armed forces has since himself resigned.

As resignations continue, the police chain of command is near non-existent, causing the police to enter an [alliance with the military](#) to control the street jointly. However, given the country's long history of military dictatorships and military intervention, it is likely the military will defer to the police in the majority of security-related incidents. As noted in the OSAC [Crime & Safety Report](#), even in the best of circumstances, the police have limited resources, especially outside major cities. In many cases, officers assigned to smaller villages/towns do not have a vehicle to respond to traffic accidents or criminal activity. Even when resources are available, response is extremely slow by U.S. standards. Bolivian police are generally incapable of dispersing large crowds and, in the current environment, may lack the resources to maintain proper order.

Ordered/Authorized Departure Status for U.S. Embassy La Paz

On November 12, the U.S. Department of State ordered the departure of eligible family members and [authorized the voluntary departure](#) of non-emergency U.S. government personnel from the U.S Embassy in La Paz. The change in posture follows an escalation in violent protests, access to the airport, and other factors affecting the U.S. Embassy and official U.S. government personnel in the country. The latest [State Department Travel Advisory](#) for Bolivia assesses that travelers should NOT travel due to **civil unrest**, noting that local police may lack the resources to respond effectively to serious criminal incidents, and emergency response, including ambulance service, is limited or non-existent.

Authorized departure status is voluntary for the specified individuals, and ordered departure is mandatory for accompanying family members. The State Department reviews this temporary status regularly for indicators that it is safe for affected individuals to return, including signs of potential threats mitigation or security conditions improvement. At this time, it is unclear how long the ordered and authorized departure will remain in effect for Bolivia. For more information, see the OSAC report, "[What are Drawdowns and How do They Impact Constituents?](#)"

What U.S. Embassy La Paz Can Do

There are no plans for a U.S.-government assisted evacuation from Bolivia. The private sector should not solely rely on the U.S. Government for security and emergency responses, including during evacuations due to security concerns and restrictions on official travel. U.S. government employees may only make essential movements around La Paz. For more information about what services the U.S. Department of State can and cannot provide in high-risk environments, see the Bureau of Consular Affairs' resource for [Travel to High-Risk Areas](#).

U.S. private-sector security managers should have multiple contingency plans in place for the protection, drawdown, and full evacuation of personnel, based on their organization's resources and level of risk tolerance. U.S. private-sector organizations should review their responsibilities under duty of care and the organizational measures they have in place to assist third-country or local staff during evacuations and breakdowns in the security environment, particularly if they decide to delegate more functions to these employees in the wake of personnel drawdowns. Organizations with sizeable assets and facilities should review their facility security and contingency plans for phased and full departure, including how to safeguard infrastructure and drawdown and/or remove critical assets from Bolivia.

Departure using Commercial Aircraft

Travel to the airports in Bolivia for departure on regional carriers may become challenging if protestors and blockades impede access. Minimal public transportation is currently available in Bolivia, and recent protests and road blockades have affected access to the airports. U.S. airlines and other international carriers have canceled flights to and from El Alto International Airport (LBP), which serves La Paz.

OSAC Guidance

Protest activity continues in La Paz and other areas of Bolivia, and the security situation remains unpredictable. Civic leader Luis Fernando Camacho has urged at least two more days of mobilization and blockade in order to ensure the formation of a transitional government. Ongoing violent protests, including looting, gunfire, vandalism, and roadblocks, present threats for private-sector personnel and operations in Bolivia. Schools, shops, public transportation, and private businesses remain closed in the main cities across the country. Additional security precautions are in force for remaining U.S. Embassy personnel.

For U.S. citizens in Bolivia, the Department advises U.S. citizens to consider departing as soon as they can do so safely. U.S. citizens wishing to depart Bolivia should make their own travel arrangements. Commercial flights remain available, and flights are operating from international airports in La Paz (El Alto, LBP) and Santa Cruz (Virus Viru, VVI). Do not travel to the airport unless it is safe to do so. Do not seek shelter at the U.S. Embassy.

Actions to Take if Operating or Traveling in Bolivia:

- Avoid demonstrations and crowds; be prepared to remain at home if necessary.
- Monitor local media for breaking events and be prepared to adjust your plans.
- Have evacuation plans that do not require U.S. government assistance.
- Contact your airline or travel agency prior to travel, and **make contingency plans to leave the country.**
- Enroll in the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#) to receive Alerts and make it easier to locate you in an emergency.
- Follow the Department of State on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).
- Review the [Crime and Safety Report](#) for Bolivia.
- Always have a contingency plan for emergencies. Review the [Traveler's Checklist](#).

Additionally, you may inform Department of State of U.S. citizens in Bolivia through the following ways:

- Email BoliviaEmergencyUSC@state.gov and provide as much information as possible (at a minimum, please provide their full name, gender, and last known location within country, if known)
- Call 1-888-407-4747 (from the U.S. & Canada), +1-202-501-4444 (from Overseas)

Further Information

For additional information on the security environment in Bolivia or elsewhere in the region, please contact OSAC's [Latin America team](#).

- [OSAC Bolivia Page](#)
 - [Consular Emergency Notification](#)
 - 2019 Bolivia [Crime & Safety Report](#)
 - Bolivia [Travel Advisory](#)
- State Department [Bolivia Country Information Page](#)