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Armenian President Moves to End Days of Protests Over Electricity Prices

By The Moscow Times

June 28, 2015



YEREVAN — Armenia's president tried to ease days of tension by suspending an increase in public electricity bills, pending a review of the decision, but failed to end a protest by thousands of people.

President Serzh Sargsyan told a meeting of senior officials that the 22-percent tariff rise would go into force but the government would cover the extra "burden" instead of the public until an independent audit of the decision was completed.

The protesters, who have occupied an avenue in the capital Yerevan since Monday, refused to go home and said they would not respond to the offer until 6:00 p.m. (14:00 GMT) on Sunday.

"We will all discuss [the offer] all night ... and call on people to mobilize tomorrow," said Vaghinak Shushanyan, one of the coordinators of the protest.

"Shall we stay for the night, carry on the fight?" he asked the demonstrators, who want the increase scrapped altogether. The crowd, which police put at 6,000, replied in unison: "Yes."

The protest has increased social tensions in the cash-strapped southern Caucasus nation of 3.2 million which was once part of the Soviet Union and has been hit hard by an economic downturn in Russia, its main ally.

The rally in central Yerevan has been peaceful since Tuesday, when police used water cannon against the demonstrators and detained about 200 but were unable to break up the rally.

The state regulatory commission decided last week that the price paid by the public would rise from Aug. 1 after the distribution company for Armenia's electricity network, a subsidiary of Russian firm Inter RAO, said it was needed because the dram currency has declined.

Sargsyan said an independent audit would determine whether the planned increase was justified.

Calling for an end to the protests, he said: "We have much to do, and we must work together to complete this difficult process."

The crowd, which has tended to dwindle during the day but swell again at night, has been using rubbish bins as barricades, and protesters carry posters with slogans such as "I'm not going to pay! Will you?" and "Stop robbing people!"

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