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Armenian Protests Continue Despite Suspension of Price Hike

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A protester gestures as he stands in front of a line of riot police during a rally against a hike in electricity prices in Yerevan, Armenia, June 28, 2015.

YEREVAN — Thousands of Armenians launched a second week of protests on Monday against a hike in electricity prices, rejecting the government's concession to suspend the increase temporarily.

The government decided on Saturday to cover the price rise out of state funds, rather than increase customers' bills, until an independent audit of the electricity supply company is completed.

But thousands of protesters remained at their sit-in on an avenue near the presidential palace in the capital Yerevan, while hundreds moved to nearby Freedom Square.

"We will stay here until our demand is fulfilled. ... Electricity tariff rises will lead to rises in all other prices," activist Hmayk Mkrtchyan told Reuters.

The crowd, which has tended to dwindle during the day but swell again at night, has made barricades of rubbish bins and carries posters with slogans like "I'm not going to pay! Will you?" and "Stop robbing people!"

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

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

The state regulatory commission decided in mid-June electricity prices paid by the public should rise from Aug. 1, after the distribution company, a subsidiary of Russian firm Inter RAO, said it was needed because of a decline in the dram currency.

Armenian officials have called the planned increases justified but have proposed an independent audit of the company.

President Serzh Sargsyan on Saturday did not rule out the possibility that the electricity distribution company would be returned to the state.

Inter RAO said on Monday it did not plan to sell its Armenian unit. "We are not in talks and not planning a sale," a spokesman said.

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