

# Bolivia's women wrestlers back in the ring

El Alto | Bolivia

Wearing a bright green billowing skirt and dainty black velvet flats, Bolivian wrestler Lidia Flores launches herself from the second rope of the outdoor wrestling ring and squashes her hapless male opponent.

Suspended for two weeks as anti-government protests and blockades rocked El Alto, a sprawling city overlooking La Paz, the cholitas luchadores are back on the canvas at Sharks of the Ring wrestling club.

The raucous crowd of elderly men, young women and parents with small children heckle and hurl insults as the indigenous women wrestlers, wearing traditional multilayered "pollera" skirts and long braids, flip, kick, punch and pull each other's hair in a chaotic show that often spills outside the ring onto the pavement.

Flores, whose performance name is "Dina the Queen of the Ring," says wrestling is a welcome relief from the pressure of her day job cooking in a restaurant.

"Wrestling

de-stresses

me," Flores, 44, tells AFP as she stands outside the venue before the match handing out fliers to people walking through a street market.

After a fortnight hiatus, the feisty mother of three, who has been wrestling for 12 years, is "very keen" to get back in the ring.

"With these problems, with so many blockades, nothing to eat, it was very stressful," she says, a black bowler

hat worn by many indigenous women perched on her head.

Weeks of unrest triggered by the disputed October 20 election, which Evo Morales claimed to have won and opposition groups said was rigged, have made life difficult and dangerous for people in El Alto, a stronghold for the former president.

A siege of a key fuel plant turned deadly last week when protesters clashed with heavily armed security forces, leaving eight people dead.

Two days later, police tear-gassed demonstrators who marched on La Paz with five of the bodies to demand justice and the resignation of interim President Jeanine Anez, who replaced Morales after he quit on November 10 and fled to Mexico.

With roads blocked and many afraid to leave their homes in the city more than 13,000 feet above sea level, the Sunday high-altitude wrestling matches were cancelled for a fortnight.

"It was the first time (in eight years) that we had to stop because of conflict," says organizer Marie Penaranda, 30, as she sells tickets for 20 bolivianos (around \$3) each.

Tensions eased at the weekend with the passing of a bill authorizing new elections and ongoing talks between the caretaker government and protesters aimed at ending the unrest.

Ana Luisa Yujra, better known as "Jhenifer Two Faces," says the spectacle is "affordable therapy for the

crowd after so much violence.

"I love demonstrating the ability, agility and capacity that a woman can have," says Yujra, who works as a geriatric nurse.

**'Rough but interesting'**

Flores, wearing a shawl the same shade of garish green as her flouncy skirt, climbs into the ring and tosses her bowler hat on the floor.

To warm up for her mixed pairs fight against Yujra, the plump wrestler performs a couple of running somersaults on

the canvas, revealing the lacy layers of her pollera and her underwear to the scores of spectators. Martha Mayta, 28, sits in the front row enthralled by the performance.

"It is really admirable ... how these women in a pollera can get into the ring, wrestle, be in those positions," she says.

The sight of male and female wrestlers stomping, beating, choking and spraying water on each other does not bother the crowd as they egg on the performers to go even further.

"It is a demonstration for us of a woman defending herself against men," Norah Martinez Salazar, 34 said.

"It seems rough, but it's something interesting."

After an intense battle peppered with references to the political crisis gripping the country, Yujra and her male partner decked out in shiny red trousers and matching top, are declared the winners.

A visibly exhausted and dishevelled Flores blows kisses to her fans as she leaves the ring defeated and returns to the makeshift change room.

"I feel bad," she says.

"I'm really tired and out of breath."



"Jhenifer Two Faces" throttles "Dina, The Queen of the Ring"



Ana Luisa Yujra, aka "Jhenifer Two Faces", slams a male wrestler



Blanca Perez (L), aka "Katy The Beautiful," struggles to free herself from a neck hold

## 'This is not over': Hong Kong protesters return to the streets



Skirmishes erupted overnight between protesters and police in Hong Kong after a rare period of calm in the city

Hong Kong

Protesters returned to the streets of Hong Kong yesterday, ending a brief election lull and demanding the government make concessions a week after pro-democracy candidates won a landslide victory.

Rallies follow skirmishes overnight between police and protesters, with tear gas fired for the first time since the November 24 district council vote and a man assaulted as he tried to clear a protester barricade.

Hong Kongers have rallied in huge numbers over the last six months, fuelled by years of growing fears that authoritarian China is stamping out the city's liberties.

The territory's Beijing-backed leaders have offered few concessions and po-

lice have cracked down hard on protesters in increasingly violent confrontations.

At one of yesterday's rallies -- a gathering to thank US lawmakers for their support -- protesters said they were determined to keep up the pressure on local authorities after the election victory.

"I would like to send a message to the government: we are not done and this is not over," said one 27-year-old protester, who declined to give his name.

He said he hoped that Sunday's demonstrations, all three of which received permits called "letters of no objection," would stay peaceful.

"I do worry that public opinion may change if violence and clashes continue," he said.

But he said he feared the movement would "simply wither if we adopt a completely peaceful manner."

## Australian freed by Taliban believes US made multiple rescue attempts

Sydney

An Australian man who spent three years in Taliban captivity said yesterday that he believes US special forces tried to rescue him and an American colleague on half-a-dozen occasions.

Speaking in Sydney for the first time since he was freed in a prisoner swap deal, 50-year-old Timothy Weeks said he never lost hope, but the captivity "had a profound and unimaginable effect" on him.

Detailing a hellish life spent moving between windowless cells in Afghanistan and Pakistan Weeks said "after almost 1,200 days, our ordeal ended as abruptly as it had begun."

Weeks and American colleague Kevin King were freed on November 20 as part of deal between the Taliban, US, Australian and Afghan governments.

The pair -- both professors at the American University in Kabul -- were kidnapped by gunmen wearing military uniforms as they returned home from classes in August 2016.

"I struggle to find words to express just how completely this has changed me. At times,



Timothy Weeks with his sisters Alyssa Carter, left, and Jo Carter in Sydney. He has spoken of his three 'long and tortuous' years in Taliban captivity.



**I believe it was the Navy SEALs right outside our door. I think they came in six times to try to get us. And that a number of times they missed us only by hours**

TIMOTHY WEEKS

I felt as if my death was imminent, and that I would never return to see those that I loved again," he said.

"But, by the will of God, I am

here, I am alive and I am safe."

He recalled that in April this year he was woken "at around 2:00am and we were taken down into the tunnels."

He was told at the time that it was the Islamic State group's local affiliate. "I believe now that it was the Navy SEALs coming in to get us. And the moment that we got into the tunnels, we were just one or two metres underground. There was a huge bang at the front door."

"Our guards went up and there was a lot of machine-gun fire," he said. "I believe it was the Navy SEALs right outside our door. I think they came in six times to try to get us. And that a number of times they missed us only by hours."

## Death toll rises to 21 after attack on Mexican town

Reuters | Mexico City

Security forces shot dead seven more suspected cartel gunmen after a weekend attack on a northern Mexican town, authorities said yesterday, bringing the death toll to 21 and adding fuel to a debate about whether the gangs should be deemed terrorists.

The government of Coahuila state said 10 gunmen and four police were killed in shootouts on Saturday in Villa Union, days after US President Donald Trump fanned bilateral tensions by saying he would designate cartels as terrorists.

The gunmen peppered the Villa Union's mayor's office with bullets and state police pursued the gang members after they fled the town, killing seven more in the early hours of Sunday, the Coahuila government said in a statement.

The leftist Lopez Obrador said on Friday he would not accept any foreign intervention in Mexico to deal with violent criminal gangs in response to Trump's comments.