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Reuters

Egypt's Mubarak faces unprecedented protests

By Marwa Awad and Alexander Dziadosz

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CAIRO (Reuters) – Police fired teargas and water cannon to disperse Egyptian protesters in Cairo in the early hours of Wednesday after a long day of unprecedented protests calling for President Hosni Mubarak to end his 30 year rule.

On Tuesday, two protesters and one policeman were killed in clashes and protests that erupted in several Egyptian cities, where demonstrators angry at poverty and repression have been inspired by this month's downfall of the leader of Tunisia.

"Down, Down Hosni Mubarak," protesters chanted after fleeing from the central Tahrir square. Some threw stones at the police, who charged them with batons to prevent the protesters returning to the square after it was cleared by using teargas.

"Bullies," fleeing protesters shouted. Others cried: "You are not men." Police sprayed a water cannon on protesters and moved in rows into the square.

Sporadic clashes took place into early Wednesday, but by the pre-dawn hours protesters appeared to have been dispersed. Police were milling about in Tahrir square, while street sweepers cleared away rocks and litter.

"Down with Mubarak" was still scrawled on a wall. Police trucks were lined up along a side street.

Some protesters had said they would try to regroup during the day on Wednesday. Security forces said protesters would not be permitted to reassemble.

Washington, a close ally and major donor, called for calm.

"The United States supports the fundamental right of expression and assembly for all people. All parties should exercise restraint and we call on the Egyptian authorities to handle these protests peacefully," State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said in a statement.

Twitter, the Internet messaging service that has been one of the main methods used by demonstrators to organize, said it had been blocked in Egypt. In a message, the company wrote: "We believe that the open exchange of info & views benefits societies & helps govts better connect w/ their people."

Thousands of demonstrators had earlier said they planned to stay out in Tahrir square until the government fell. Some protesters and police shared food and chatted on Tuesday evening after a day of protests that closed many Cairo roads to traffic.

Demonstrators tore up pictures of the president and his son, Gamal, who many Egyptians say is being groomed for office. Both Gamal and his father deny any such plan.

'DAY OF WRATH'

"Tomorrow, don't go to work. Don't go to college. We will all go down to the streets and stand hand in hand for you our Egypt. We will be millions," wrote one activist on a group on Facebook, which has been a key tool mobilizing demonstrators.

Tuesday was a national holiday and ministries were closed. A government source said ministers had been told to ensure staff returned to work on Wednesday and did not join protests.

Web activists, who called for Tuesday's "Day of Wrath" against poverty and repression, have become some of the most vociferous critics of Mubarak and his three decades in office.

Their complaints echo those of fellow Arabs in Tunisia: soaring food prices, a lack of jobs and authoritarian rule that usually crushes protests swiftly and with a heavy hand.

Tuesday's demonstrations brought many thousands onto the streets of Cairo and several other cities in a coordinated wave of anti-government protests not witnessed since Mubarak came to office in 1981 after Anwar Sadat was assassinated by Islamists.

The population is growing 2 percent a year and has a "youth bulge," with some 60 percent under 30 years old, including 90 percent of jobless Egyptians. About 40 percent of citizens live on less than \$2 a day and a third are illiterate.

DEMANDS

Demands by the protesters were posted on Facebook and passed around Tahrir square on slips of paper before police moved in.

They included calling for Mubarak to step down, Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif to quit, parliament to be dissolved and the formation of a national government. A union activist repeated the demands to the crowd in the square by megaphone.

"We are glued to the ground here in Tahrir and will not move, not tomorrow, not the day after until this government falls," said 35-year-old shopkeeper Sameh Adam, shortly before protesters emptied the square.

Protests on Tuesday also erupted in Alexandria, cities across the Nile Delta and in Suez and Ismailia, east of Cairo.

Two protesters in Suez were killed by rubber bullets, security and medical sources said. State television said one security officer died in Cairo because of a blow to the head from a stone that was thrown. Lawyers said dozens were detained.

The Interior Ministry, which had warned of arrests before Tuesday's demonstrations, said it would allow stationary protests for short periods. But in Cairo demonstrators took over major roads and blocked traffic across the capital.

The ministry blamed the Muslim Brotherhood for rioting that took place, although the banned Islamist group has only played a bit part in protests. The group has even drawn the anger of its own youth members who say they have not been proactive enough.

Analysts say protests in Tunisia and developments across the region have made the claims of many Arab autocrats that they stand as bulwarks against Islamist radicals sweeping to power seem hollow.