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Al Jazeera

Egypt protesters gain ground

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The Egyptian cabinet building in Cairo has been evacuated and officials relocated after pro-democracy protesters gathered outside, sources tell Al Jazeera.

Pro-democracy demonstrations are gaining momentum in the Egyptian capital, with some protesters moving from Tahrir [Liberation] Square to camp out in the area outside the parliament buildings.

Protesters are demanding the assembly's immediate dissolution. Wednesday's developments came as public rallies calling for Hosni Mubarak to hand over power immediately entered their sixteenth day.

The president's message has thus far been that he will not leave until his term expires in September.

As a gesture of goodwill, 34 political prisoners, including members of the banned opposition group, Muslim Brotherhood, were reportedly released over the last two days.

The government seems to be scrambling under pressure from major powers and pro-democracy supporters, Al Jazeera's Stefanie Dekker reported from Cairo.

She said, however, that there are still an unknown number of people missing, including activists thought to be detained during the recent unrest.

Human Rights Watch reported that the death toll during the uprising has amounted to 302 since January 28, the bulk of fatalities coming from Cairo.

Egypt's health ministry denied the figures, however, saying that official statistics would be released shortly.

Union support

Outside parliament, protesters gathered on Wednesday with blankets and had no plan to move, our correspondent reported. The demonstrators have a sign put up that says: "Closed until the fall of the regime".

Meanwhile, labour unions across Egypt, mobilised by the pro-democracy momentum, were staging strikes demanding higher wages and better treatment from their employers.

Strikes were taking place nationwide, including in Mahalla and Suez. Numbers are said to have reached around 10,000 workers at various factories in different cities over the past 24 hours, Al Jazeera correspondents reported.

"It is a significant gain for the pro-democracy supporters" if the unions get involved in demonstrations, Al Jazeera's Hoda Abdel-Hamid reported from Cairo.

Tahrir Square resembled a tented city on Wednesday, as protests - attended by many first-timers - reached some of their highest numbers on Tuesday.

Many feel this showed that the movement, now in its third week, still has momentum.

Protesters are "more emboldened by the day and more determined by the day", Ahmad Salah, an Egyptian activist, told Al Jazeera from Cairo on Wednesday. "This is a growing movement, it's not shrinking."

"People feel very strongly here," Al Jazeera's Dekker said.

She said people in Tahrir Square were angered by a visit from Tamer Hosni, a famous Arab pop star, on Wednesday morning.

Hosni previously made statements telling the demonstrators to leave the square, saying that Mubarak had offered them concessions. "His comments really did not go down very well," our correspondent said. The [crowd reacted angrily](#) and the military had to intervene to keep them away from him.

Another Al Jazeera correspondent, reporting from Cairo, said there was also renewed international element to the demonstrations, with Egyptians from abroad returning to join the pro-democracy camp.

There is even an internet campaign aimed at mobilising thousands of expatriates to return and support the uprising, our correspondent said.

Newcomers joining

Many newcomers who joined Cairo's protesters said they had been inspired in part by the release of Wael Ghonim, the Google executive, previously held by state security authorities.

Ghonim was the person behind a page called "We are all Khaled Said" on the social networking site Facebook, which is being credited for helping spark the uprising in Egypt.

Amr Fatouh, a surgeon, said he had joined the protests for the first time.

"I hope people will continue and more people will come. At first, people did not believe the regime would fall but that is changing," he said.

Ban Ki-moon, the UN chief, said on Tuesday that genuine dialogue was needed to end the current crisis, and that a peaceful transition was crucial. "The Egyptian people are clearly frustrated, and are calling for bold reforms. It is incumbent on the Egyptian leadership - and that of any other country in the world - to listen attentively to the legitimate concerns and aspirations of their people," he said.

US vice president Joe Biden, in a telephone conversation with his Egyptian counterpart Omar Suleiman, on Tuesday called for increased dialogue between opposing sides.

Biden suggested several steps, including an immediate abolition of the country's emergency laws, that give sweeping powers to the security forces. He also suggested halting the arrest of journalists and activists, and involving more opposition members in negotiations.

Suleiman warned on Tuesday that his government "can't put up with continued protests" for a long time, saying the crisis must be ended as soon as possible.

Suleiman said there will be "no ending of the regime" and no immediate departure for Mubarak, the state news agency MENA reported from a meeting between the vice-president and independent newspapers.

Suleiman reportedly told the editors of the newspapers that the regime wants dialogue and doesn't "want to deal with Egyptian society with police tools."

At one point in the roundtable meeting, Suleiman warned that the alternative to dialogue "is that a coup happens, which would mean uncalculated and hasty steps, including lots of irrationalities. We don't want to reach that point, to protect Egypt."

'Very dangerous'

Pressed by the editors to explain the comment, he said he did not mean a military coup but that "a force that is unprepared for rule" could overturn state institutions, Amr Khafagi, editor-in-chief of the privately owned *Shorouk* daily, who attended the briefing, said.

Suleiman warned that calls by some protesters for a campaign of civil disobedience are "very dangerous for society and we can't put up with this at all."

This comes after he announced a slew of constitutional and legislative reforms, to be undertaken by yet to be formed committees.

Earlier on Tuesday, Suleiman said a plan was in place for the peaceful transfer of power.

He said demonstrators will not be prosecuted and an independent fact-finding committee would be established to probe the violence on February 2.