

Egypt: Mass protests over price hikes

Our correspondent
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The Egyptian government rushed April 8 to grant some concessions to workers after two days of riots over high food prices and low wages spread across the northern industrial city of Mahalla al-Kobra, 100 kilometres north of Cairo, the Associated Press reported.

Police shot dead a 15-year-old boy in the Nile Delta and a 45-year old man died from wounds sustained during clashes between Egyptian police and workers on April 7. The man died at a nearby hospital from a bullet wound to the head, sources said, without giving further details.

The dead boy, Ahmed Ali Mabrouk Hamada, was standing on the balcony of his family's flat when bullets hit him in the head and neck, according to the security sources. Ahmed's uncle, Alaa al-Shebeeni said, "He was asleep on the third floor when he heard loud bangs and came out to check and suddenly he was hit by a bullet and fell to his death."

Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif visited the textile town with four ministers, offering bonuses and more investment in the town's giant factory to placate workers angry over high prices. Prices have risen sharply in Egypt, where 40 percent of the people live in or near poverty.

Mahalla al-Kobra, on the Nile Delta, has seen a wave of strikes for more than a year, but the anger exploded into rioting on April 5-6. The fighting continued into April 7-8 as protesters threw petrol bombs at security forces. Police fired tear gas at the crowds.

According to AP, "Protesters tore down a billboard of President Hosni Mubarak and fought with police in clashes that left one person dead in the worst unrest since Egypt's 1977 riots over increased bread prices.

"Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif hurried to Mahalla al-Kobra on Tuesday with several top economic ministers to meet with workers at the 50-year-old, state-owned Misr Spinning and Weaving factory complex that

employs 25,000 people."

"Nazif told them, 'We know Mahalla is suffering and you have passed through many crises, but it is through crises that men prove their mettle. He then announced they would receive a bonus of 30 days' pay and promised to address their demands for better health care and higher wages'."

The report cited Rashad Fathi, a factory worker, complaining that his monthly wage of \$34 was not enough to feed his four children. He added, "What Nazif has said, we've heard it all before—what's new? They really have no idea how we suffer here."

Joel Beinin, an authority on labour politics at the American University in Cairo, told AP, "I think [the Egyptian government] realized what happens if there are street battles for a protracted period of time and this way is cheaper and better. What if it lasted for a week? What if people did the same in Alexandria?"

After Nazif's visit, Mahallah remained tense amid fears of more unrest and the municipal elections were cancelled. According to a *Reuters* report, following Nazif's visit, "about 2,000 workers and local residents protested after dark in front of a town police station, threatening more violence if authorities did not release protesters who had been detained.

"Prosecutors had ordered 331 people held for 15 days on suspicion of taking part in acts of violence, which injured more than 75 since they began on Sunday.

"The workers had tried to go on strike and protest against high prices but plainclothes security men took control of the factory and forced them to work, workers said."

A 28-year-veteran of the textile factory, Mervat Ahmed, said after the prime minister's speech, "I understand why people are so angry. These are just our kids and our sons, and they are rioting because they are depressed and frustrated."

Ahmed added that she only makes about \$91 a

month. “What can I do with my salary? I have three kids, and every day prices go higher and higher.”

The chief of United Nations humanitarian operations, John Holmes, said April 8 that “poor people around the world are facing worsening hardship because of the expense of food.”

Food prices have risen an average of 40 percent over the last year.

“The security implications should also not be underestimated as food riots are already being reported across the globe,” Holmes said during a conference in Dubai.



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