

Curfew ordered in Tunisian capital

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The Tunisian government ordered a total curfew over Tunis and its suburbs to last from 8 p.m. Wednesday until 6 a.m. on Thursday morning, after riots and demonstrations against high unemployment, government corruption, and spiraling prices hit the capital city. The wave of protests began weeks ago in regional towns and cities.

Police fired tear gas in the city center against hundreds of demonstrators, who responded by hurling stones. International correspondents in Tunis—who report heavy censorship from the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali—say that the military has been deployed in critical spots in the city and its suburbs. The military presence is reportedly most concentrated in Tunis’ suburb of Ettadhamen, west of the capital, which was the site of rioting the night before.

According to *Al Jazeera*, five protesters were killed in Tunisia on Wednesday, among them a university professor. The *Deutsche Presse-Agentur* reported that two protesters were killed by police in the city of Douz, while Deutsche Welle put the number killed there at four. The Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* reports that in the tourist city of Tozeur the municipal building was set ablaze. In the coastal city of Sfax, tens of thousands responded to a call for a general strike Wednesday.

All schools and universities remain closed indefinitely. Football matches had earlier been banned. Extensive efforts by the government to hack into Tunisians’ e-mail and Facebook accounts have been all but confirmed, according to Danny O’Brien of the Committee to Protect Journalists. “All the evidence points to a state-controlled” hacking operation, he said.

President Ben Ali made no public appearances on Wednesday, increasing speculation that his 23-year-old regime may be nearing its end. The Egyptian newspaper *El Wafd* has reported that his wife and children have already fled for the United Arab Emirates, and the *New York Times* reports that other

Ben Ali relatives have also hastily departed.

There are unconfirmed reports that the military has resisted Ben Ali’s orders to break up demonstrations, and may be preparing a coup. According to Tunisian opposition sources, army chief General Rashid Ammar was removed for failing to carry out orders, and was replaced by Ahmad Shabir, head of the Tunisian secret service.

Since they began nearly one month ago, demonstrations have resulted in an official death toll of 21. The real number is far higher. According to a local union representative, at least 50 were killed in the city of Kasserine in one night of rioting last week. The victims were reportedly shot by police snipers. In spite of the bloodshed, Kasserine was the site of another protest on Wednesday, according to *El Pais*.

The government took steps to mollify popular anger on Wednesday, but these too failed to head off the protests. Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi dismissed Interior Minister Rafik Belhaj Kacem, and decreed that most prisoners arrested during the demonstrations would be freed. He also announced the formation of a commission to investigate “excesses committed during the troubles” and “the question of corruption and faults committed by certain officials.”

The Interior Ministry under Kacem had earlier defended the bloody police repression in Kasserine, claiming that only four “attackers” were killed and that “police used their weapons in an act of legitimate defense.”

Repression continues under Kacem’s replacement as interior minister, Ahmad Faria, who after assuming office quickly ordered the arrest of Hama al-Hamami. Al-Hamami was jailed until 2002 for the formation of an illegal party, the Tunisian Workers Communist Party.

The riots in Tunisia began in the middle of December after Mohamed Bouazizi, a university graduate who

worked as a street vendor, set himself on fire to protest police seizure of his fruits and vegetables. The 26-year-old Bouazizi died from his injuries on January 4.

News of his action spread via e-mail and social networking sites, escaping police censorship and triggering protests across the country.

Demonstrations were first concentrated in the nations' poorer eastern and southern regions, but they have spread to the wealthier coastal cities and now to Tunis itself, prompting a number of European countries to issue travel advisories.

The spread within Tunisia of the protests, which have been called a "bread Intifada," and the eruption of similar demonstrations over price increases in neighboring Algeria, have raised fears that that seething social anger may ignite in other pro-western regimes in the region, including critical US allies Morocco, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

On Wednesday, the Libyan regime of Moammar al-Gadaffi announced that it would suspend all taxes on foodstuffs and other basic commodities in a bid to head off rioting spreading from Algeria and Tunisia, both of which border Libya to the west.

The conditions that have given rise to the events in Tunisia—"high levels of unemployment, soaring food and fuel inflation and corruption in [the] ruling class," in the words of the BBC—are common throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and, for that matter, Europe and North America.

By all accounts, the demonstrations in Tunisia are the spontaneous eruption of the impoverished masses. There is no evidence that Islamic fundamentalists or "terrorists"—who Ben Ali proclaims to be responsible—have played any significant role.

The established trade union federation, the UGTT, a long-time Ben Ali ally, has only in recent days hinted at support for the demonstrations. After formally opposing them, the UGTT is now trying to place itself ahead of the storm erupting from below, calling a series of city-by-city general strikes. Citywide strikes are slated for Kairouan and Jendouba today, and for Tunis on Friday.

With the prospect that the Ben Ali regime may collapse growing by the day, every effort will be made by pro-capitalist forces in Tunisia, including the UGTT, to replace it with a government that will continue to carry out the dictates of Washington, Paris, and the

international finance industry.

The US and the European powers may already be preparing for a post-Ben Ali Tunisia. "The United States is deeply concerned by reports of the use of excessive force by the government of Tunisia" said US State Department spokesman Mark Toner, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Wednesday issued her first tepid criticism of the government response, expressing concern over the "deaths of mostly young people who were protesting." The European Union issued a statement criticizing the regime's "disproportionate response."



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