

Mass protests spread in Middle East as Washington reassures Israel, Arab dictators

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Inspired by the Egyptian people's overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, protests continued to spread in the Middle East on Monday, as Washington scrambled to reassure Israel and pro-US regimes in the region of its continued support.

For a fourth straight day, demonstrators in cities throughout Yemen clashed with security forces and mobs of plainclothes policemen and hired thugs posing as supporters of the US-backed government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

In the capital city of Sana'a, the anti-government demonstrations grew in size on Monday. The AFP news agency said that over 3,000 people attempted to march towards the city's Tahrir (Liberation) Square to demand the ouster of President Saleh, who has ruled the country for more than 32 years.

As they neared the square, they were attacked by riot police using batons, rifle butts and electric cattle prods. Mobs of plainclothes police thugs then attacked demonstrators with daggers and broken bottles.

Among those demonstrating were the country's lawyers dressed in black robes. The protesters chanted, "The people want the regime to step down," "leave Saleh" and "After Mubarak, Ali."

Also on Monday, the police and thugs broke up a demonstration of several hundred students at Sana'a University. Security forces have blocked key streets with razor wire to prevent protesters from marching on the presidential palace.

Scores were reported injured in the repression, some of them suffering stab wounds. Many more have been detained by the security forces.

"Police and bullies hurled stones at the protesters fed up with bad living conditions, high unemployment rates, widespread corruption at the public institutions and oppression," the *Yemen Post* reported. "They also beat them with stun batons, and police also fired live ammunition in the air in an attempt to disperse the protesters."

In the southern city of Taaz, at least a dozen people were

injured in attacks by police firing tear gas and assaulting protesters with electric batons.

In the southern port city of Aden, dock workers, who have waged a long battle against the regime, took the lead, storming the offices of the Yemen Gulf of Aden Port Corporation and seizing top officials, including the agency's chairman, Mohamed Bin Aefan.

"We have had it with corrupt officials and it's time to tell them to leave," Ali Bin Yehya, a port worker told Al Jazeera. "What happened in Egypt and Tunisia motivated the workers to demand their rights."

The Saleh regime has pursued the same tactic as Mubarak's dictatorship in Egypt, ordering police to assault journalists in an attempt to block any coverage of the repression. BBC correspondent Abdullah Gorab reported live on Monday: "I'm bleeding from my head. The policemen who were accompanying a prominent official figure, Hafez Meayad, were running after me after they asked more than 50 protesters from the ruling party to hit us. They took my phone and my cameramen's phone. They beat any correspondent who tries to film the attack on the protesters. This is the current regime now in Yemen. No rule, no law. I'm bleeding now as I escape from the police."

The demonstrations have escalated despite the agreement of opposition parties to accept Saleh's offer of "dialogue." In response to growing unrest and the example of the Egyptian uprising, the Yemeni dictator announced that he was dropping his bid to change the country's constitution to allow him to become "president for life," and pledged that his son, the chief of the Republican Guard, would not succeed him. Opponents of the regime, however, point out that similar pledges were made in 2006 and then forgotten.

At the same time, the regime's National Defense Council has unveiled plans for a new law giving it unfettered power to tap phone lines, open mail and monitor electronic communications, provoking even greater popular anger.

The poorest country in the Arab world, Yemen has an unemployment rate of around 40 percent, with some 45 percent of its nearly 20 million people living on \$2 a day or

less. These appalling conditions have been exacerbated in recent months by a sharp rise in food prices.

Already facing a separatist movement in the south of the country and a protracted armed conflict with Shia forces in the north, Yemen has been the focus of an escalating US military and CIA intervention, ostensibly directed against Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula.

Even as repression mounts in Yemen, the US military is expanding its training of Yemeni security forces. Citing Pentagon sources, the Associated Press reported Monday that Washington is launching a \$75 million program to train Yemen's counter-terror troops, a force now numbering 300. The program is designed to double the size of the force, which is a key component of Saleh's repressive apparatus.

Demonstrations also erupted Monday in the Persian Gulf island kingdom of Bahrain, which serves as the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet and the Pentagon's Naval Forces Central Command. The "Day of Rage" called by opponents of the Sunni monarchy which rules the predominantly Shia territory saw clashes erupt in two Bahraini villages as security forces imposed an intense crackdown.

Dozens of people were injured Sunday night and Monday as police sought to break up protests using teargas, rubber bullets and clubs. In the village of Nuweidrat, police attacked some 2,000 people who sat down in the street demanding the release of Shiite detainees and an end to the oppression of the majority population.

The US-backed monarchy has arrested scores of its opponents in recent months, charging them as "terrorists." Political opponents have been subjected to savage torture to force them to sign false confessions. Opposition web sites, newsletters and publications have been shut down by the regime.

Shiites in Bahrain, while making up 70 percent of the population and 80 percent of the workforce, face discrimination in terms of jobs and housing and are severely underrepresented in a largely powerless parliament. They are barred from employment by the country's largest employer, the security forces, which imports Sunni Muslims from abroad and then grants them citizenship as a reward for repressing the population.

The eruptions in Bahrain are of particular concern to the Saudi monarchy, Washington's key ally in the region. The Saudi regime oppresses its own Shia population, which constitutes the majority in the country's oil-producing Eastern Province.

The regime in Bahrain is, if anything, more ossified than that of Mubarak in Egypt. Power is concentrated in the hands of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa and the country's prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the king's uncle, who has held the post for nearly 40 years.

In a desperate bid to bribe the population into halting the protests, the al-Khalifa family dynasty has promised to award 1,000 dinars (\$2,650) to every family in Bahrain and has suggested that it may release minors who have been imprisoned since a crackdown last year. It has also said it will rescind plans for budget cuts, demanded by international lending agencies, and instead spend another \$417 million on food subsidies.

As the demonstrations spread throughout the Arab world, Washington focused its efforts on reassuring its principal ally in the region, Israel, as well as the remaining US-backed Arab dictatorships that they can rely on US support.

Admiral Mike Mullen, chief of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited Jordan on Sunday for talks with King Abdullah II and his Jordanian counterpart, Lieutenant General Meshaal Al-Zabn. He then went to Israel for discussions with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Israeli President Shimon Peres and the chiefs of the Israeli military.

On the eve of the visit, a Pentagon spokesman said that the chief US military officer would discuss "security issues of mutual concern and reassure both these key partners of the US military's commitment to that partnership." The key "concern" is quelling the Egyptian revolution and preventing its spread throughout the region.

Mullen told the Israelis, "our relations with the Egyptian army haven't changed. Friendship at such a challenging time is very important."

For his part, Netanyahu said on Monday that "an earthquake is shaking the Arab world," and that Israel's nuclear-armed military is "ready for all eventualities." He described the Israeli military as "the foundation of our existence."

Mullen's tour was supplemented by a visit to Amman by Undersecretary of State Bill Burns. President Obama was reported to have called the Jordanian king, while Vice President Joe Biden was on the phone over the weekend to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who has also faced mounting demonstrations over unemployment, living conditions and corruption, and to the ruling emirs in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.



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