

Egyptian protesters storm secret police headquarters

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8 March 2011

Thousands of demonstrators, many of them former political prisoners and victims of torture, stormed buildings belonging to the State Security Investigations agency in Cairo, Alexandria and other Egyptian cities, after reports that the secret police were burning documents to cover their tracks.

The attacks began in Alexandria, the country's second-largest city, on Friday night, March 4, and continued over the weekend in Cairo, the capital, and many regional cities. Demonstrators took documents from at least 11 state security offices around the country. They want the documents preserved to provide evidence for the prosecution of officials of the dictatorship of former president Hosni Mubarak.

Yesterday 47 state security officers were arrested on suspicion of burning documents, according to the Prosecutor General's office. They said they would hold the officials for 15 days, pending investigations.

The SSI was Mubarak's principal instrument for the suppression of political opposition and dissent, with an estimated 100,000 agents and 500,000 informants. It also served as a torture subcontractor for the American CIA, which regularly "rendered" prisoners to Egypt for interrogation. The release of SSI documents could thus provide evidence of crimes against humanity by American as well as Egyptian officials.

The first attack in Alexandria was the most violent, as demonstrators massed outside the security headquarters during the day, then moved on the building after rumors spread that the security officers were burning their papers. Security police opened fire with tear gas and escalated to live ammunition, after which the crowd stormed the building and overpowered them. Four protesters were wounded and 20 security police badly beaten, according to eyewitness reports to the press. Several police cars were also firebombed.

Army soldiers were called in to rescue the police, but many of the demonstrators refused to leave the building, setting up an occupation while they pored through the documents and sought to recover those that had been shredded.

One demonstrator, Kutb Hassanein, who spoke with the Associated Press, said many of the protesters were former victims of the police. "We all suffered and saw horrible torture at the hands of this agency," he said, adding that he had himself been detained in the building several times. "There is a huge desire to take revenge. But we would rather see them all put on trial," Hassanein concluded.

The next evening saw an even larger group, some 2,500 people, attack the national headquarters of the SSI in the Cairo suburb of Nasr City. Protesters reportedly saw trucks being loaded with garbage bags full of shredded documents, and forced their way into the building. The demonstrators grabbed many paper files and computer hard drives, hauled them outside and set up a human wall around them to protect the evidence from destruction. They eventually turned over the material to state prosecutors and military officials.

Among the items recovered were documents on an attack on a Coptic Christian church in January—widely believed to be a state provocation—and one ordering phone taps on people who called in to political talk shows. Both were posted on the Internet before being turned over to the prosecutors.

The whistle-blower web site WikiLeaks issued an appeal to Egyptians not to throw away shredded documents, offering its services to help reconstruct the material and post it for the information of the public.

According to a report by Priyanka Motaparthi of the US-based Human Rights Watch, carried in the *Washington Post*, the protesters found "the files of well-

known Egyptian activists who faced torture,” while some “wandered through the halls of the building, shouting ‘where are the prisoners?’”

The demonstrators found no prisoners in three levels of underground cells, but did recover implements for torture, including electric shock devices.

“We are getting inside, and we are finding the secrets that have haunted us for so many years,” former prisoner Haytham Hassan told the *Washington Post*. “This feeling is better than anything that has happened so far.”

A crowd also stormed the SSI headquarters in the northwest Nile Delta city of Mersa Metruh, removing documents, then setting the building on fire. According to the report by the French news service AFP, “Residents of the coastal resort then sat at nearby cafes leafing through the documents for evidence of human rights abuses as smoke billowed from the headquarters.”

The Egyptian newspaper *Ahram Online* reported that the military had taken over the SSI compounds in Alexander and 6th of October City, another Cairo suburb, and that SSI buildings were burning in Qena, Port Said, Zagazig, Domiat and Tanta. Other attacks took place on the SSI building in the Cairo suburb of Sheikh Zayed, where guards fired shots in the air, in the Nile Delta town of Sharqia, and the oasis city of Fayoum south of the capital.

Meanwhile, in an effort to forestall wider protests, the new prime minister, Essam Sharaf, appointed by the military ruling council Thursday, named a new interior minister. Mansur al-Issawi took office Sunday, pledging to take “all necessary measures to restore confidence between citizens and police.” He replaces Mahmud Wagdi, a last-minute appointment by Mubarak just before his resignation February 11.

A new cabinet was sworn in yesterday before Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces—the military regime that took power after Mubarak left office.

New members include Egypt’s former UN ambassador Nabil ElArabi as foreign minister, and Major General Mansour el-Essawy—a former Cairo security chief—as interior minister. Two members of official “opposition” parties took Cabinet posts. The Wafd Party’s Monir Fakhri Abdel-Nour took the tourism portfolio, while the Tagammu party’s Gouda

Abdel-Khaliq el-Sayed became minister of social security.

Wagdi was the replacement for Habib al-Adly, a long-time head of the security forces who was widely hated as one of the most corrupt and brutal of Mubarak’s henchmen. Al-Adly became so notorious that the military council has been obliged to order his arrest and trial on charges of money-laundering and abuse of authority, which began Saturday.

Prime Minister Sharaf issued an urgent appeal for “the return of all documents or papers taken from the headquarters of the state security to the army due to the dangerous nature of their contents.”

Violent incidents continued on Sunday, as a crowd formed outside an SSI headquarters in Cairo’s Lazoghly neighborhood. Armed thugs carrying knives and throwing rocks then attacked the protesters and tried to disperse them. After troops intervened and fired warning shots to protect the SSI building, the demonstrators retreated and marched to the central Tahrir Square.



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