

# Violent crackdown against mass demonstrations in Yemen

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The US-backed regime of President Saleh responded to an intensification of anti-government protests with deadly force, killing at least seven demonstrators and injuring hundreds more.

Mass protests across Yemen have rocked the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the US-backed dictator who has been in power for 32 years. Beginning on Friday, hundreds of thousands of anti-government protesters have taken to the streets in towns and cities across the Middle East country in a sustained effort to oust the regime.

In a televised statement on Thursday, Saleh offered to enter into dialogue with the bourgeois al-Islah opposition party and to frame a new constitution within a year. Recognizing that this was desperate attempt by the regime to maintain its grip on power, anti-government crowds gathered after Friday's Muslim prayers to demand the fall of Saleh.

An estimated 100,000 people took to the streets of the capital, Sanaa, on Friday, in the largest single demonstration to have taken place in Yemen since the start of anti-government protests in February. There were clashes around the city's Tahrir Square as a smaller crowd of several thousand pro-Saleh loyalists confronted protesters.

Thousands marched through the city of Taiz, where police and armed pro-Saleh thugs attacked the crowd. One 20-year-old anti-government demonstrator died of gunshot wounds. There were also large protests in Hadhramout province and the port city of Aden. Three

protesters were wounded by gunfire in Aden, where police launched volleys of teargas grenades in an effort to disperse the demonstration.

Most government employees and tens of thousands of workers in the private sector did not show up for work on Saturday, either as a protest against the regime or in order to participate in demonstrations.

On Saturday, the Saleh regime signaled that it planned to crush the growing anti-government protests when police in the capital attacked an encampment of around 100,000 demonstrators near Sanaa University.

In an early morning raid, hundreds of police, as well as security forces in plain clothes, rushed the protesters. Wielding clubs and firing live bullets and teargas grenades, Saleh's forces attempted to clear the camp, which has grown in size as broad sections of the population joined a weeks-long student sit-in.

Security forces gunned down at least four people at the camp. Arab satellite television stations showed footage of scores of young demonstrators being carried away from the area near the university on stretchers, blood pouring from their wounds.

"It felt like a massacre, there were police teams in official uniforms and plain clothes police, and they were attacking the protesters," a witness told Reuters news agency. "They used teargas and gunfire and chased some people out into the streets."

Smaller demonstrations were held in other towns and cities across Yemen on Saturday, which were also met with vicious force by police. Hundreds of protesters

across the country were wounded, with a 12-year-old boy killed at a demonstration in the southern city of Mukalla.

Thousands defied the government crackdown to protest in the capital on Sunday. Protesters in Sanaa and other cities have set up barricades to defend themselves from riot police, while students and other anti-government demonstrators are continuing their sit-in near Sanaa University. Demonstrators in Aden stormed a police station, and seized weapons after officers fled.

Police killed at least one other demonstrator on Sunday, and over 100 anti-government protesters were wounded when security forces again fired live ammunition, water cannon and teargas into a crowd in Sanaa. There were reports of police snipers firing on protesters from the roofs of buildings in the capital.

One doctor at a hospital in Sanaa told the BBC that six people had been killed and approximately 1,250 injured over the weekend.

Hospitals in Sanaa have reported that 20 people are being treated for severe reactions to gas inhalation. Some doctors have reported that the type of teargas being used by the police is toxic and dangerous to the nervous system. "This isn't teargas," Dr Hussein al-Joshaai, an Iraqi nerve specialist working in Sanna, told the AFP news agency. "This is poison gas that disables the nervous and respiratory systems."

At least 32 protesters have been killed by the regime since anti-government demonstrations broke out in February. US-based group Human Rights Watch recorded that 25 people were killed in February, the majority under the age of 18, with another seven killed in the past three days. In addition, the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate has documented 53 cases of journalists being beaten or prevented from reporting by pro-Saleh forces.

Protests continued in the neighboring Arab countries of Saudi Arabia and Oman, as well as in Bahrain, the island sheikdom in the Persian Gulf. A crowd of 200 people gathered outside Saudi Arabia's Interior

Ministry in Riyadh on Sunday to demand the release of political prisoners. Saudi authorities have mobilized thousands of police and security agents to prevent planned demonstrations against the monarchy.

Washington has responded with typical hypocrisy to the brutal crackdown by its client regime in Yemen. A State Department official repeated the same pro forma statement that the Obama administration has issued in response to all the brutal attacks on protesters by its Middle East allies, saying that, "People everywhere share the same universal rights to demonstrate peacefully and freely assemble and express themselves."

The US State Department released a statement on the killings in Yemen on Saturday, claiming, "The United States is deeply concerned about reports of dead and wounded in the protests that took place in Yemen."

While the US has condemned Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi for killing anti-government forces, and called for his resignation, the Obama administration has made no such demands regarding the Saleh regime. Instead, the State Department merely requested that Yemeni authorities "promptly investigate these incidents and take steps to protect the rights of all its citizens, in accordance with the commitments of President Ali Abdullah Saleh."

US Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein stated the administration's ongoing support for the Saleh regime and the suppression of the protests. "We've been clear in saying we don't believe that the demonstrations are the place where Yemen's problems will be solved," he told Reuters news agency last week.

"We think the problems have to be resolved through this process of dialogue and negotiations. Our question is always, 'If President Saleh leaves, then what do you do on the next day?'" Feierstein continued.



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