

US-backed regime in Yemen carries out new slaughter of protesters

David Walsh
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The regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, which continues to enjoy the support of the Obama administration and other Western powers, carried out another massacre of anti-government demonstrators Monday, in the southwestern city of Taiz.

The exact number of the dead is unknown, as police reportedly removed some of the bodies in their vehicles, but the head of a makeshift hospital in the city's center told Agence France-Presse that at least 17 people were killed and dozens wounded when police and military opened fire on tens of thousands of protesters. Other sources indicated that 30 people remained in critical condition.

Monday's incident was the worst atrocity carried out by the Saleh regime since the murder of at least 52 demonstrators in the capital city of Sanaa on March 18.

Photographs reveal an immense crowd flooding the streets of Taiz, a city of some 460,000 near the Mandab Strait that connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden. The protesters, demanding the departure of the dictator Saleh, were attacked near the provincial governor's headquarters, as they marched toward Freedom Square.

A *Washington Post* reporter spoke to Yaser Alnusari, a medic in Taiz, who explained that the "first four of the protesters who were killed were shot by snipers at the governor's office.... The protesters were in tens of thousands and were protesting on most of the main streets in Taiz. They were condemning the violent actions that took place against them yesterday." On Sunday, security forces in Taiz killed two demonstrators and wounded several others.

The *Post* noted that televised images showed "police clutching guns, tear gas canisters and batons [targeting] unarmed protesters marching toward a provincial government building."

MSNBC reported that "Witnesses described troops and gunmen, some on nearby rooftops, firing wildly on

thousands of protesters who marched past the governor's headquarters in Taiz.... Some—including elderly people—were trampled and injured as the crowds tried to flee, witnesses said."

The MSNBC account, based on Associated Press and Reuters reports, cited the comment of Omar al-Saqqaf, who was in the crowd: "It was heavy gunfire from all directions. Some were firing from the rooftop of the governor's building." Al-Saqqaf "said he saw military police load the bodies of two slain protesters into a car and then speed away."

A 47-year-old engineer, Abdul Habib al-Qadasy, told AP, "There were people dressed in both soldier uniforms and civilian clothes shooting live bullets from rooftops."

The military has blocked entrances to the city and surrounded Freedom Square with tanks and armored vehicles, arresting anyone who tries to leave. Taiz has been the scene of continual protests and sit-ins over the past six weeks aimed at bringing down the Saleh government.

In the western Yemeni city of Hudaida on Monday, security forces also violently set on anti-Saleh demonstrators—who were marching in solidarity with Sunday's victims in Taiz—and wounded dozens with gunshots and blows from rocks and truncheons. Some 400 other people in the country's fourth largest city, a port on the Red Sea, had to be treated for tear gas inhalation.

An unnamed eyewitness in Hudaida told Reuters, "They [the protesters] suddenly gathered around the province's administrative building and headed to the presidential palace, but police stopped them by firing gunshots in the air and using tear gas. I saw a lot of plain-clothes police attack them too."

The *National* (Abu Dhabi) reports that a general strike was called and largely observed April 3 in Aden in southern Yemen, as well as Taiz. The newspaper commented, "Workers and students appeared to abide by

calls for a general strike yesterday in Aden and in Taiz, another southern city, witnesses and media reported.... According to witnesses, several streets in Aden were blocked and dozens of shops were closed in response to the opposition's calls to shut down the city." Further media accounts report that residents of Sheikh Othman, Mansora, Crater, Mualla, and other districts of Aden were on strike and all public and private offices were closed.

More than 100 people have been killed by security forces and thousands wounded in the protests that began in February. However, there have been no calls from the US government and other Western regimes, which parade their supposed humanitarian concerns to justify the war against Libya, for the departure of Saleh, a critical ally in the struggle with Islamic fundamentalism and guardian of imperialist interests in the region.

The *New York Times* floated a story Monday suggesting that the Obama administration had "quietly shifted" its policy and now sought the ouster of Saleh. The *Times* observed: "The Obama administration had maintained its support of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in private and refrained from directly criticizing him in public.... This position has fueled criticism of the United States in some quarters for hypocrisy for rushing to oust a repressive autocrat in Libya but not in strategic allies like Yemen and Bahrain."

The *Times* article also noted Washington's "wary relationship of mutual dependence with Mr. Saleh." Not so "wary" that it prevented the US from giving Saleh hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of military hardware and training. "The United States has provided weapons, and the Yemeni leader has allowed the United States military and the C.I.A. to strike at Qaeda strongholds," wrote the newspaper.

Indeed, as a lengthy piece in the current *New Yorker* magazine points out, "since the unrest began, the Saleh regime has received unusually strong support from the Obama Administration. The White House has made clear it believes that in Yemen abrupt change must be avoided, even at the cost of Yemeni lives."

At the same time, the US is deeply involved in negotiations with the Yemeni bourgeois opposition, seeking to come up with a resolution of the crisis that would possibly involve removing Saleh while preserving the repressive state and security apparatus. Whether the April 4 *Times* article was part of an effort by American officials to intimidate Saleh and obtain concessions from him or not, State Department spokesman Mark Toner subsequently played down the *Times*'s claim that US

policy had shifted.

While terming the violence in Taiz and Hudaida "appalling," Toner did not suggest that it was time for Saleh to step down. He claimed, "That's not necessarily a decision for us to make," although Obama officials were not so modest in demanding Muammar Gaddafi's departure in Libya. Toner told reporters that the US was talking to the Yemeni government and opposition in the hope of achieving "a peaceful solution."

Contrary to the *Times* report of a shift in US policy, MSNBC reported April 4: "A diplomat in Sanaa said on Monday the focus for now was still on talks, and that public calls [for Saleh] to stand down—which have only so far come from France—were premature.... If Washington were to call on Saleh to go, 'I'm not sure if he [Saleh] would immediately cave in,' he added." The latter comment is absurd. Saleh clings to power thanks only to the US government and military.

Yemen's official opposition, organized in the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP, or Common Forum), is a collection of Saleh's tribal rivals and former political allies, Islamists and other largely discredited forces. Over the weekend, the JMP offered its "vision" of the political future. It proposed that Saleh hand over power to his vice president, Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi, who would then be charged with the organization of writing a new constitution and holding new elections. Student groups leading the protest rejected this proposal as merely a new lease on life for Saleh and his family.

The character of the current negotiations, and the opposition, can be gauged by this revealing comment in Britain's *Daily Mail*: "Talks [between the Saleh regime and the opposition] have been off and on over the past two weeks, sometimes in the presence of the U.S. ambassador."

The Yemeni dictator is remaining firm, as the violent repression carried out Monday reveals. On Sunday, Saleh called for "a halt to all protests and the mutiny by some units in the military." He added that "arm-twisting will absolutely not work."



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