

More violent attacks on protesters in Yemen

David Walsh
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Security forces attacked tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators in the Red Sea port of Hudaida in south-central Yemen on Monday, reportedly wounding at least 88. Plainclothes police fired live ammunition and teargas at protesters.

The violence in Hudaida and other cities on Monday, following massive demonstrations over the weekend, is part of the ongoing struggle of wide layers of the population to rid themselves of the hated regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Residents in Hudaida (Yemen's third largest city and an important port, with a population of some 400,000) told journalists that police, armed with bats, pistols and stones, attacked crowds who marched into the streets outside the square they have been occupying for weeks.

According to Reuters, in an initial round of clashes 15 people were hurt, "two were shot and the others were beaten or hit with stones, doctors said, and protesters began to withdraw back to their camp.

"Clashes erupted again as riot police fired shots and teargas at a group of protesters, witnesses said. Protesters responded by marching out of their camp again, this time headed for Hudaida's main thoroughfare, residents said."

In a subsequent police attack, five people were shot and 68 were assaulted or suffering from teargas inhalation. A witness explained that "protesters built a roadblock to try to prevent police getting closer to the demonstrations."

On Sunday police attacked huge crowds in the capital of Sana'a, part of a massive mobilization that saw hundreds of thousands of Yemenis, or more, turned out nationwide to demand the end of Saleh's rule. In the capital, security forces opened fire on the demonstrators with live ammunition and shot teargas grenades. At least 100 people were injured, reported a doctor at a field clinic along the route of the anti-government march.

One protester, Abdullah Kulaibi, told UPI, "We were being

shot at directly. Security forces were trying to kill us and not disperse us." Another, Sabry Mohammed, told Reuters that when demonstrators neared the Sana'a Trade Center, police confronted them with teargas, and "suddenly opened heavy gunfire on us from all directions."

Agence France-Press (AFP) reports that "Security forces also used water cannon to disperse demonstrators as police cars carried away many wounded protesters." An AFP video reporter at a Sana'a hospital was told by a medical source that there were 1,000 suffocation cases from tear gas and 30 people injured by live rounds.

In Dhamar province on Sunday, more than 45 demonstrators received injuries from police attacks. Major protests also occurred in Taiz (where 100,000 people demonstrated), Ibb, Aden and Hudaida. Banners read, "We want to overthrow the regime and to bring the assailant [Saleh] to justice."

The vast outpouring of protest and outrage was given new impetus by Saleh's cynical and stupid comment Friday, which criticized the protest movement for allowing women to participate with men in demonstrations. He called it a violation of Islamic law. Saleh's appeal to social backwardness backfired, as women (and men) turned out in massive numbers Saturday and Sunday. In Sana'a, the women chanted, "Hey, Yemeni women, revolt. Ali is a dictator."

A youth movement in the leadership of the protests declared that the dictator's remarks about women were "a continuation of his violations against the Yemeni people after he killed them and accused them of being agents and outlaws."

CNN comments that on Sunday, "Sana'a's main roads were flooded with crowds estimated by eyewitnesses as being in the tens of thousands pushing for a revolution—most of them women, according to eyewitnesses."

Several women protesters were set upon by Islamic extremists and soldiers on Saturday, according to a human rights activist in Sana'a. Four women were beaten and eight men, with whom they were marching, were arrested. Abdul Rashid Al Faqih told UPI, "No activists in the history of

modern Yemen have been beaten up like these women activists.”

Meanwhile efforts at foisting a new government on the Yemeni population, which would guarantee the wealth of the national elite and the geopolitical interests of imperialism, continue apace, spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and the Obama administration in the US.

Leaders of Yemen’s bourgeois opposition coalition, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), met with foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—representing the reactionary monarchies of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and Kuwait—in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on Sunday in a further effort work out a deal. The opposition delegation was headed by a former foreign minister, Mohammed Salem Basendwah.

The JMP is insisting that any agreement involve the rapid departure of Saleh, while the latest GCC proposal refers to the transfer of power to Yemen’s vice president and includes no time frame. It also provides for immunity for Saleh and his cronies, which the JMP more or less accepts, but wide layers of the population oppose. No agreement could be reached this past weekend; further talks are planned.

The Gulf council, dominated by Saudi Arabia, declared in a statement that “the dialogue was brotherly and constructive.”

The *Wall Street Journal* bluntly characterized the ongoing negotiations April 18: “In Yemen, the Saudis, also working under a Gulf Cooperation Council umbrella, have taken control of the political negotiations to transfer power out of the hands of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, according to two Saudi officials.

“‘We stayed out of the process for a while, but now we have to intervene,’ said one official. ‘It’s that, or watch our southern flank disintegrate into chaos.’”

Equally cynical, and also revealing, were the comments of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to the US-Islamic World Forum in Washington, DC on April 12. Clinton was attempting to explain and justify the obvious double standard in US policy: Washington continues to back brutal dictatorships in Yemen, Bahrain and elsewhere, on the one hand, even as it self-servingly insists that Muammar Gaddafi in oil-rich Libya must step down, on the other.

The secretary of state argued that the Obama administration rejected “a one-sized-fits-all approach [that] doesn’t make sense in such a diverse region at such a fluid time. As I have said before, the United States has specific relationships with

countries in the region.” As an example, she referred to the “decades-long friendship with Bahrain that we expect to continue long into the future.”

As for the Saleh regime, Clinton resorted to diplomatic double-talk: “The United States also strongly supports the people of Yemen in their quest for greater opportunity, their pursuit of political and economic reform that will meet their aspirations. President Saleh needs to resolve the political impasse with the opposition so that meaningful political change can take place in the near term in an orderly, peaceful manner.”

Conditions for the largely impoverished Yemeni population continue to deteriorate, and anger is growing. Half the population in the poorest Arab country already lived beneath the official poverty line at the outset of the present crisis. The currency, the rial, has lost some 20 percent of its value since January. Inflation is now running at 15-18 percent, while GDP is growing at less than 1 percent a year.

Food prices are rising sharply in Yemen, according to the World Food Program (WFP). “Staple products such as vegetable oil, rice, and wheat have risen by 11, 22, and 45 percent respectively since March. ‘We’re not saying that suddenly now there’s a food crisis—we’re saying there has been one for years,’ says Gian Carlo Cirri, Yemen’s WFP representative” (*Christian Science Monitor*, April 18).

The Associated Press reports: “Anger about the price increases and shortage of cooking gas have been building for weeks, with protests surfacing in major cities, including the capital, and hundreds of people blocking main roads with empty gas cylinders. Meanwhile, unemployment, pegged at 49 percent in 2010, according to economists, is getting worse as business tapers off and the devaluation in the rial has hammered the construction sector.

“‘There is no chance for work,’ said Abdullah al-Matari, a 55-year-old construction worker and father of eight who was one of hundreds of other day laborers waiting for a job at a downtown Sana’a market.”

AP adds: “In Sana’a, angry youth who spent three days demonstrating outside a gas distribution center clashed repeatedly with police and dispersed on Saturday, only after a truck arrived carrying full gas cylinders. But even then, resentment abounded.”



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