

Ugandan police open fire on protesters

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Police have opened fire on protesters in Uganda and imprisoned many in recent days. Two people were reported to be dead and 90 were treated for injuries in the Ugandan capital of Kampala on Friday. One of those killed was a two-year-old girl. There have been two weeks of protests over rising food and fuel prices.

Friday's demonstration was a response to the arrest of opposition leader Kizza Besigye the previous day. Besigye, who leads the Forum for Democratic Change, has organised a series of "walk to work" protests. It is the fourth time he has been arrested in the last month.

Further demonstrations were reported on Monday. The police arrested a number of prominent oppositionists, and a total of 102 people are said to have been imprisoned.

President Yoweri Museveni's son Muhoozi Kainerugab, who heads Uganda's Special Forces, is in personal charge of the crackdown. Interior Minister Kirunda Kivijinja blamed Besigye for the violence.

The Ugandan-based *Monitor* reported that the army and the presidential guard were patrolling the streets of Kampala. Sporadic gunfire was reported from the suburb of Bweyogerere on Saturday. The military were still engaging demonstrators. Witnesses report high-speed military vehicles racing through Kampala to quell new protests.

Jinja Highway, the main route connecting Uganda and neighbouring Kenya, was reported to be deserted. Youths have blocked the road at Kireka, Banda and Bweyogerere. Bus passengers are stranded in several towns after their drivers were forced to abandon their vehicles. Shops, markets and banks are closed.

Students and lecturers at Makerere University have abandoned classes and staged protests at

Nsibairwa Hall. The police attacked them with teargas trucks outside the central library. Military police reinforcements arrived later and beat the students with batons.

"People were burning tyres and logs and roads blocked, teargas was shot about 20 minutes ago", a law student said on Friday morning. "The place is not empty, but

mambas are patrolling up and down".

Mambas are the armoured cars used by police in Uganda. The British government, which has supplied these vehicles, has justified selling them to Uganda on the grounds that they could be used to provide escorts for food convoys. These military vehicles are now being used to suppress the Ugandan population.

President Museveni has been in power since 1986. Britain and the United States identified Museveni as representing a new generation of African leaders who embodied what they described as an "African Renaissance". Museveni led the National Resistance Army that overthrew President Milton Obote. As a guerrilla leader, he had always claimed to be a Marxist. But on coming to power he adopted neo-liberal economic policies and imposed a structural adjustment programme drawn up by the IMF. His government has privatised state enterprises and encouraged foreign investment.

He was welcomed to the Reagan White House and became one of Washington's closest allies in Africa. Museveni has acted as a regional strongman on behalf of American interests. US support for Museveni remains strong. The US embassy in Kampala has called on the protesters to respect property and obey the law.

Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Johnnie Carson spoke to the Ugandan foreign minister on Thursday. Carson warned him to respect Besigye's rights. After his arrest Besigye was allowed to leave the country and took refuge in Kenya, where he was said to be undergoing medical treatment.

Besigye was Museveni's personal doctor. He turned against Museveni in 1999, saying that the regime had become a one-man dictatorship. His Forum for Democratic Change has in all respects the same policies as Museveni. Besigye has not criticised the close relationship with America or the neo-liberal economic policies that have led to an increase in poverty and unemployment for the majority of the population.

Besigye has come in second to Museveni in three successive elections. He claims that the votes were rigged.

European Union and Commonwealth observers expressed concerns about the latest presidential election in February 2011, which Museveni won with 68 percent of the vote. They criticised the level of commercialisation of the election campaign as giving an advantage to the incumbent, but Washington upheld the validity of the vote.

President Museveni recently extended the limit on presidential terms, allowing him to stand for re-election. His February victory will mean that by the time his latest term of office comes to an end he will have been president of Uganda for 30 years.

The *New York Times* praised the peaceful nature of the election, but pointed out that the government had attempted to censor text messages containing certain words, such as “Egypt” and “bullet”.

Censorship has increased since the election. Social networks are now being blocked, and this practice is on the rise in sub-Saharan Africa. Swaziland and Cameroon have shut down Twitter and Facebook. But Uganda is the first East African country to do so. Facebook is among the most popular websites in Uganda and the use of the Internet has grown over the last few years.

Both Facebook and Twitter were widely used by journalists in the course of the elections. Journalists face frequent harassment from the security forces. Reporters say that their cameras have been seized, that they have been beaten up, hit with teargas canisters, and threatened with guns. Local journalists, particularly those in rural areas, are most at risk. When they complained to the interior minister about police tactics use against them he said, “That is your problem”.

The social unrest in Uganda is the most serious in sub-Saharan Africa following the revolutionary uprising in Egypt and Tunisia. It is fuelled by rising prices, high youth unemployment and the lack of services following Museveni’s privatisation campaign. A recent report said that the increased use of casual labour was worsening the conditions of workers in Uganda. The Foundation for Human Rights Initiative (FRHI) pointed out that the minimum wage of 6,000 shillings per month was fixed in 1984 and has never been up-rated.

“The laws provide strong protection for workers rights to form or join trade unions and participate in industrial actions. But employer refusal to recognise and negotiate with trade unions remains widespread”, said Livingstone Sewanyana of FRHI.

According to IMF figures the average income in Uganda was \$300 in 2004. This is among the lowest in

sub-Saharan Africa. Growth was averaging 2.5 percent a year in this period, but it has not been translated into job creation or poverty reduction. The benefits have gone to an already wealthy elite.

In the first six months of this year growth averaged 11 percent. Next year Uganda’s oilfields will come on line. While this will certainly boost GDP, it is unlikely that the working class and rural poor will benefit. The IMF has warned the government that it must direct government spending to oil-related infrastructure projects and rein in other forms of spending.

This focus of government spending on the oil sector will leave the drought-stricken north deprived of funds. Only 4 percent of GDP is invested in agriculture, but most of the country’s population depend upon it for a living.

Northern Uganda is subject to seasonal drought. The northern “cattle corridor”, which borders on Sudan, is especially susceptible. In the past, state granaries have maintained emergency stocks for dry periods. These grain reserves have now been sold off under the IMF structural adjustment plan. If the government is to provide an emergency feeding programme for the north, it must buy the grain it needs at current prices and keep within the IMF spending limits.

Deepening class tensions are inevitable in Uganda as the majority of the population are driven ever further into poverty.

Many other sub-Saharan African countries face similar conditions. Social explosions can be anticipated across the continent, and the only response that will come from governments is further repression. But official opposition movements like the Forum for Democratic Change share the same political and economic policies as the rest of the ruling elite. If they were in power, they would impose the same neo-liberal IMF measures.



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