

Death toll soars in fighting in Yemeni capital

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At least 40 people were killed Thursday in bloody battles in Sanaa, the capital city of Yemen, bringing the death toll in four days of fighting between anti-government militiamen and forces loyal to President Ali Abdullah Saleh to more than 100.

Thousands of people were fleeing the city in cars and trucks loaded with personal possessions and furniture, in an effort to avoid a conflict that seems rapidly escalating toward full-blown civil war.

The fighting broke out Monday after a weekend in which President Saleh abruptly reneged on a promise to step down, for the third time since the political crisis in Yemen erupted in January. He refused to fulfill an agreement brokered by the United States, the European Union and the Arab monarchies that would have required his departure from office within 30 days in return for an amnesty from prosecution for all crimes committed during his 32 years of corrupt and dictatorial rule.

In response to Saleh's defiance, thousands of armed members of the powerful Hashid tribe began flocking to the capital city Sunday. Saleh summoned as many as 30,000 troops loyal to him, from the Republican Guard and Central Security forces, commanded by his son Ahmed and nephew Yahya. He then ordered his troops and plainclothes thugs to attack the home of the Hashid tribe's leader, Sadiq al-Ahmar, on Monday, touching off gun battles that have expanded throughout the week.

Militiamen loyal to al-Ahmar have laid siege to as many as nine government ministry offices in Sanaa, and on Thursday Saleh officially ordered the arrest of al-Ahmar and nine of his brothers "for armed rebellion." McClatchy Newspapers reported, "By Tuesday evening, the Interior Ministry was in flames and the Ministry of Industry and the offices of Yemenia Airlines and the Saba news agency were severely damaged."

Al-Ahmar spoke to the Associated Press by telephone and accused Saleh of "dragging the country to a civil war." The government was deliberately provoking violence, he said: "He is sending a message to the world: 'Look if I leave, this is the kind of war that will take place'."

Fighting has spread to the neighborhood around the Sanaa airport, prompting the government Tuesday to divert all commercial flights from Sanaa to Aden, the major city in southern Yemen. Air service was restored Thursday, according to the airport's director.

In the single bloodiest incident, 28 people were killed in a massive explosion at dawn Thursday, in what government officials said was the explosion of an arms storage depot. Opposition leaders said the blast was the result of government shelling of a residential neighborhood in the city.

Explosions and machine gun fire could be heard sporadically across Sanaa, according to press reports, and black smoke from the conflict hung over the city. In addition to the mass exodus of civilians, thousands lined up at bakeries, gas stations and banks seeking to get food, fuel and cash.

The coalition of bourgeois opposition groups called the Joint Meeting Parties issued a statement Thursday denouncing the president's "insistence on dragging Yemen toward civil war." The statement continued: "We call on President Saleh to stop the fighting and answer the demand of the Yemeni people for an immediate and urgent abdication of power."

The leaders of the Group of Eight, the most powerful capitalist nations excluding China, began their summit meeting in Deauville, France by issuing a statement calling on Saleh to quit. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking in Paris, declared, "We continue to support the departure of President Saleh who has consistently agreed that he would be stepping down from power and then consistently reneged on those

agreements.”

In a statement issued Monday, Saleh repudiated the departure deal devised by the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Saudi-dominated organization of six Persian Gulf monarchies. “I will not leave power and I will not leave Yemen,” he declared, adding, “Yemen will not be a failed state. It will not turn to an al-Qaeda refuge.”

Saleh also claimed, “I don’t take orders from outside,” a belated and ludicrous appeal to nationalism from a ruler who has long been a stooge of the United States and Saudi Arabia. He has cultivated particularly close relations with Washington over the last four years, when his regime raked in more than \$200 million in military aid, buying resources that are now being put to use slaughtering his own people.

In one of the more notorious episodes of this collaboration, revealed by WikiLeaks, Saleh authorized the US government to fire missiles at alleged terrorist targets in Yemen, while telling his own parliament that the action had been taken by Yemeni armed forces.

The Yemeni president has repeatedly presented his regime as the last line of defense against Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula, an offshoot of the terrorist group established by Osama bin Laden, although AQAP is estimated, even by American counterterrorism officials, to number no more than 300 men in a country of 23 million.

The US State Department echoed Saleh’s rhetoric Wednesday, urging all Americans to leave Yemen because of “terrorist activities and civil unrest.” A major concern of Washington is that Saleh’s stubborn refusal to quit and turn over power to the bourgeois opposition may open the door to more radical factions and ultimately destabilize the entire Arabian peninsula, the largest oil-producing area in the world.

In perhaps the most ominous statement, the White House counterterrorism chief, John O. Brennan, told Saleh in a telephone call to accept the agreement negotiated with the GCC, warning, “if he doesn’t sign, we’re going to have to consider possible steps.”

This is likely to include instigating direct military action against Saleh by a number of top generals who publicly declared their support for the opposition, but have not involved their own troops in combat with the president’s loyalists.

So far the role of these troops has been to serve as a

buffer between the regime’s thugs and the student protesters, camped out in the hundreds at Sanaa University. Many of these demonstrators have left the encampment in University Square because of the escalating violence in other parts of the city.



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