

Yemeni regime kills dozens in Taiz and Sana'a, bombs southern city

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The embattled regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen stepped up its campaign of repression Monday and Tuesday, resulting in the deaths of dozens of protesters and civilians.

In a crackdown that began late Sunday night and carried on into early Monday, Saleh's security forces overran a protest camp set up by anti-government forces in the southwestern city of Taiz (population approximately 500,000), killing dozens and injuring hundreds.

Taiz has been the scene of massive protests for almost four months, including a general strike. Reporters and protesters describe scenes of violence and death Sunday night into Monday morning. Soldiers and plain clothes security officers first moved on the camp in central Taiz, the temporary home to thousands, using live ammunition, stun grenades, water cannons and tear gas to disperse the mostly youthful demonstrators.

According to an eyewitness account provided to the *Washington Post*, "They then set dozens of tents on fire and bulldozed hundreds of other tents without checking whether anyone was still inside." The soldiers reportedly used Molotov cocktails to set the tents ablaze while snipers shot at unarmed demonstrators from surrounding buildings. A field hospital set up in preparation for such an attack was itself destroyed.

The *Independent* noted that one protester claimed "he had seen a tent ablaze with its terrified occupants inside unable to escape. Boushra al-Maqtari, one of the organisers of the protests, called it a 'massacre', saying the many wounded had been dragged off to detention centres. Others claimed police had removed several of the dead bodies, suggesting the actual death toll could be much higher."

An Agence France-Presse item alleged that soldiers also "stormed ... the Al-Safwa Private Hospital, seizing dead bodies as well as some injured protesters. Televisions and satellites inside the camp were also confiscated by the

security forces. Two cars belonging to protesters have been burned by police and plainclothes gunmen."

The Chinese news agency Xinhua reported that doctors in Taiz told their reporter that at least 63 people died in the attack and that 800 were injured, dozens of them with serious gunshot wounds.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay told the media Tuesday that her office had received not as yet confirmed reports that at least 50 people had been killed in Taiz by government security forces since Sunday. Pillay said "reports indicate that hundreds more have been injured."

On Tuesday police opened fire again on demonstrators attempting to reassemble in the center of Taiz, firing rubber bullets, live ammunition and tear gas, and killing several people. An activist told the *Post*, "The city is boiling ... And armored military vehicles blocked all the roads leading to the city to prevent people from nearby districts to join the protesters." He added that shops and offices in Taiz were closed.

The Yemeni air force bombed the southern city of Zinjibar on Monday, killing dozens of people and causing widespread destruction. According to the Saleh regime, the small southern city 30 kilometers northeast of the major port of Aden, was overrun by Islamist elements over the weekend. Six soldiers were reportedly killed Tuesday in an ambush on an army convoy.

Opposition forces in Yemen assert that Saleh evacuated security forces from Zinjibar on Friday, deliberately creating a vacuum and inviting a takeover by the Islamists. According to this argument, the government is both attempting to create a diversion from the dire social situation and the struggles around the country, and also trying to put teeth into Saleh's claim that without his presence the country would fall to Al Qaeda.

Gen. Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, a top military figure who defected from Saleh's ranks in March, commented in a

statement, “Saleh has surrendered the Abyan governorate [to] armed militias.”

The *Christian Science Monitor* took note of the comments of Yemeni analyst Abdul Ghani al-Iryani who “says there were no clashes between AQAP [Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula] militants and the Yemeni military in Abyan, where Yemen’s elite, American-trained counterterrorism units have been stationed for months.

“Yemeni forces had been engaging AQAP elements in fierce clashes throughout the south of the country in recent months. The fact that these forces, which were more than capable of repelling an AQAP advance, were pulled out of the area or not used was uncharacteristic of recent campaigns against militants, according to Mr. Iryani.”

In fact, it is not entirely clear that the elements who seized Zinjibar are associated with AQAP, which experts suggest has no more than a few hundred members in Yemen.

In any event, Al Jazeera reported May 31 that Monday’s air attack on Zinjibar “targeted positions held by the fighters, but also hit buildings in the town of 20,000, killing at least 13 people earlier in the day and more than 17 later on. ‘The city is devastated. All of its residents have left. Even the dogs, animals and donkeys have abandoned it,’ said an opposition member in the city who asked to be named as Ali.”

Reuters added that “bodies were strewn on the streets [of Zinjibar], the national bank building was burned and explosions rocked the city. Most of the inhabitants have fled the city.”

Fighting between government and Islamist forces continued on Tuesday, with local journalist Shukri Hussein telling the *Financial Times* that “Shelling from both sides is taking place right in the middle of the city.”

In the capital of Sana’a meanwhile, the fragile truce between the Saleh regime and opposition tribal forces broke down Tuesday after only two days, leading to further violent clashes. The media reported artillery and machine-gun fire in various parts of the city of some 1.75 million people late Monday and early Tuesday.

Last week, following the third occasion on which Saleh refused to step down after a deal on a new government had apparently been reached, more than 120 people were killed in fighting between opposition elements and police and soldiers loyal to the regime.

Reuters explained that “street fighting raged” in Sana’a on Tuesday. Heavy explosions reportedly “rocked” a northern district of the city. A resident, referring to the

loud blasts, told the news agency, “I think it is the first time missiles are being used in the street battles.” Many people were killed in the fighting in Sana’a and dozens injured.

The truce between Saleh and one of the country’s most powerful tribal leaders, Sadiq al-Ahmar, was arranged over the weekend, and Ahmar agreed to hand over the Ministry of Local Administration, which his supporters seized last week, to a mediation committee. The tribal rebels retook the ministry Monday night, according to media reports. They also apparently grabbed control of a number of new buildings, including the upper house of parliament and a key street leading to the airport.

Ahmar claimed the government broke the truce by attacking his house. For its part, the Saleh government alleges that the rebels first attempted to seize the ruling party headquarters.

The Obama administration issued its usual toothless comment on the carnage in Yemen. The US State Department declared Tuesday: “We are deeply troubled by the ongoing clashes between different factions in Sana’a and other areas in Yemen. ... We call on President Saleh to conform immediately to his commitment to the transfer of power in a peaceful and orderly fashion.”

Washington has provided Saleh, a close ally for years, with hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid that is helping the Yemen regime to suppress and murder protesters in anything but a “peaceful and orderly fashion.”



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