

Yemen fighting wounds president and prime minister

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Rockets fired by an anti-government militia struck the presidential compound in Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, killing at least seven people and wounding many of the top officials of the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, including Saleh himself.

While rebel spokesmen initially claimed Saleh had been killed, the Yemeni ruler, in power for 33 years, gave a brief audio message to state television to disprove the claim, although his breathing appeared to be labored, according to those who heard the broadcast.

Saleh cancelled plans to appear at a post-attack press conference, as a further demonstration that he had survived, leading to press speculation that he had been seriously injured.

Prime Minister Ali Mohammed Mujawar reportedly suffered burns to his face, while the most seriously wounded top officials were said to be the governor of Sanaa, Nooman Dweid, and a deputy prime minister, Rashad al-Alimi, Saleh's top security aide, who remained unconscious from the blast.

The chief of parliament, Yahya al-Raie, was critically injured, while another parliamentary leader, Abdulaziz Abdulgani, MP Yasser al-Awadi, and Saleh's private secretary Abdo Burji were all wounded.

At least three rockets hit the presidential compound, one of them devastating a mosque on the grounds where Saleh and his aides were praying, according to the state television account. The mosque's imam and six presidential bodyguards were killed in the explosion.

The attack on the presidential compound came amid escalating violence throughout the country, which erupted in open warfare two weeks ago after troops loyal to Saleh attacked the home of Sheikh Safiq al-Ahmar, head of the Hashed tribe, the largest in the country, and brother of the country's richest man,

cellphone billionaire Hamid al-Ahmar.

Militiamen loyal to the al-Ahmars have flocked to the capital to do battle with the Republican Guard and other special forces units, which remain under Saleh's direction, while the Yemeni military as a whole has largely stayed on the sidelines, professing neutrality.

There were press reports earlier in the week that General Ali Mohsen, a general who broke publicly with Saleh in March, was cooperating militarily with the al-Ahmars. Certainly, the ability of so-called tribal forces to command tanks and rockets suggests a degree of coordination with the US-backed military.

Ali Mohsen has deployed his troops around the student occupation at Sanaa University, blocking attacks by Saleh's thugs on the protesters, but has otherwise declined to take a public role in the ongoing political conflict.

Saleh touched on these fissures in the military-backed regime in his audio message on state television. He blamed a "gang of outlaws" for the rocket attack on his headquarters, and appealed for the armed forces across the country to come to his defense.

Saleh's own forces launched their own attacks on the homes of opposition leaders, shelling the homes of both General Mohsen and Hamid al-Ahmar, the billionaire brother of Sadiq, who is a major figure in the Islah (Reform) party.

Al Jazeera reported that shells also struck near the Sanaa University campus, and that artillery exchanges and heavy machine-gun fire raged in the Hassaba neighborhood of northern Sanaa, where much of the fighting of the past two weeks has been concentrated. Both the headquarters of the national airline Yemenia and the offices of Suhail TV, a station controlled by the al-Ahmars, were destroyed.

Tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered at the

protest camp outside the university, dubbed “Change Square,” for Friday prayers, while as many as 50 coffins, with the bodies of victims of the week’s fighting, were borne past them in procession, and shells roared past overhead in multiple directions.

The chaotic scene seemed to symbolize the hijacking of the mass popular movement against Saleh, with the demonstrations now overshadowed by the violent power struggle between rival factions of the corrupt ruling elite.

The al-Ahmars are longtime allies of Saleh, who was originally elevated from obscurity in the ranks of the military with their support, more than 30 years ago. In the face of Saleh’s intransigence—he has three times agreed to leave power and three times reneged on deals brokered by Saudi Arabia and the United States—the al-Ahmars are leading what amounts to a palace coup from within the Saleh camp.

Jamal Nasser, speaking for the Coordinating Council for the Youth Revolution of Change, one of the groups organizing the university protest, said, “We do not support the al-Ahmars and we vow to remain peaceful.”

There were reports, however, that youth in Taiz, south of the capital, had begun to take up arms after a massacre Tuesday in which government security forces attacked a protest camp and killed at least 68 unarmed demonstrators.

Three policemen were killed by a rocket-propelled grenade attack in Taiz, and 28 more were wounded in clashes with demonstrators, according to the spokesman of a local hospital. Two protesters were killed and 30 wounded in the fighting.

The Obama administration continued its efforts to manage the crisis in Yemen so as to safeguard the interests of US imperialism, which has provided more than \$200 million worth of military aid to the regime over the past four years. Yemen has a long border with oil-rich Saudi Arabia and a long coastline on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the route for much of the oil supplies leaving the Persian Gulf.

John Brennan, the White House homeland security and counterterrorism adviser, completed a three-day trip to the region Friday, after talks on the situation in Yemen with officials in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

White House spokesman Jay Carney reiterated the

administration position that Saleh should “begin the process of transferring power immediately. We continue to call on his government to cease and desist from using violence against peaceful protesters. And we remain very concerned about what’s happening there.”



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