

Bahrain: State's Lethal Crackdown Backfires on Regime

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There was an uneasy calm in Bahrain's capital, Manama, last night following nearly a week of lethal repression by state security forces which has left eight civilians dead and hundreds injured.

But the appalling violence inflicted by state forces seems to have now galvanized the protest movement and radicalizing its calls for the entire regime to go.

"No dialogue before this regime is removed," is now a rallying call among protesters who are gathering in increasing numbers every day.

If the bloody crackdown last week was aimed at terrorizing pro-democracy demonstrators off the streets, then the gambit has backfired spectacularly for the US-backed regime of

King Hamad Al Khalifa in this tiny Persian Gulf oil-rich state.

Tens of thousands of pro-democracy protesters are camping at the Pearl Monument - now dubbed Pearl Square - in defiant mood after facing down riot police on Saturday afternoon. Military helicopters could be heard over the city, but it seems that the authorities have ordered the army and police to withdraw after shocking scenes of state violence in recent days failed to quell the demonstrators.

Medics at the main public hospital at Salmaniya said they were still struggling to cope with the numbers suffering from gunshot wounds, some of the victims in a critical condition.

More than 200 people are being treated at the hospital, including children who suffered severe skin burns from tear gas fired at anti-government protesters. Victims were seen being trolleyed from the Accident and Emergency Department to other wards to make way for newly admitted patients. Men were limping along corridors suffering from gunshot wounds and several had bandaged heads.

Senior consultant Dr Ghassan Dhaif said: "We have never seen wounds like these. The security forces seem to be using new types of weapons because the bullets are difficult to remove."

Dr Ghassan added that several of the wounded included doctors and paramedics who were attacked by army and police while trying to tend to people injured on the streets.

"This is a crime against humanity and we are demanding that senior government ministers

should be prosecuted.”

He said that when the security forces moved in to disperse protesters at the Pearl Square in the early hours of Thursday, they used live rounds. “They were shooting to kill because many of the victims suffered gunshot wounds to the head and upper body.”

Friday also witnessed further lethal force when army tanks fired on protesters making their way to Salmaniya and the Pearl Monument.

“The minister of health ordered us to not admit people to this hospital, but we refused his order. All our medical staff remained on duty and other nurses and doctors not on duty volunteered immediately to the hospital,” said Dr Ghassan.

Many of the nurses that volunteered were not regular A&E staff and both doctors and nurses even made blood donations as the hospital became engulfed with gunshot victims.

“We are demanding the health minister’s immediate resignation,” said Dr Ghassan.

Meanwhile, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, has called for “national dialogue” in the aftermath of the violence.

But protesters and opposition parties say that they will not enter negotiations until the entire regime in the Persian Gulf state stands down.

A spokesman for the main opposition group Al Wefaq, a mainly Shia party, told the Irish Times last night that its demands included: resignation of Bahrain’s ruling executive – some 20 of the 25 ministerial posts are held by members of the Al Khalifa royal family; the establishment of an elected government; release of all political prisoners; and prosecution of ministers and military personnel over the recent killings.

Maryam Al Khawaja, of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, said: “The regime’s offer of talks is a bit late. There are people dead and many disappeared under this regime’s orders.”

She added: “The protest movement in Bahrain is growing stronger by the day. And the people are demanding for this regime to be removed. Everyone, including opposition political parties, will have to listen to the people. It is the people who are leading this movement, not the politicians.”

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