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## **Omar Suleiman warns of coup as tension rises between Egyptian demonstrators, army**

**Protesters occupy new territory near the Egyptian parliament building, sparking a temporary confrontation with troops. Vice President Omar Suleiman warns of tougher measures to prevent a possible coup.**

By Timothy M. Phelps and Kim Murphy, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting From Cairo

Egypt's government and protesters edged closer to violent confrontation Wednesday as demonstrators escalated their tactics and the vice president warned of a coup if the unrest continued, saying protests must end or "the dark bats of the night" would emerge to terrorize the nation. Advertisement

Labor unrest continued in the nation for a second day, threatening to merge the political goals of the opposition with the more focused economic issues that have long plagued Egypt.

And violence spread to a normally peaceful desert oasis 500 miles southwest of Cairo, where police killed four people.

Protesters in central Cairo's Tahrir Square, reenergized by a massive crowd Tuesday after turnout began to flag on Monday, promised the biggest demonstrations yet on Friday, this time nationwide as well as in multiple locations in Cairo. On Wednesday, they defied the Egyptian army by occupying the street in front of the parliament building, creating a second front in downtown Cairo.

Egyptian Vice President Omar Suleiman, in comments to Egyptian newspaper editors published Wednesday, warned sharply that the demonstrations could not continue. Suleiman, who until now has presented himself as a soft-spoken voice of reason in discussions with opposition leaders, sounded rattled as he warned of tougher measures.

The protests are "very dangerous for society, and we can't put up with this at all," he said.

"We don't want to deal with Egyptian society with police tools."

He said he foresaw "the dark bats of the night emerging to terrorize the people" if the situation was not resolved. If protests against President Hosni Mubarak's leadership continued, he said, the likelihood is that "a coup happens, which would mean uncalculated and hasty steps, including lots of irrationalities."

A coup could come from within the regime, the army, the police or intelligence services, which Suleiman used to lead, or the opposition, he warned.

Middle-class Cairenes in particular were terrified by the withdrawal of police from the city Jan. 28, resulting in a mass release of prisoners and reports of people from poor neighborhoods marauding at night in wealthier areas. Many have spent nights outside guarding their homes and businesses with makeshift weapons and sometimes guns.

Though fewer people have been out patrolling the last two nights, Suleiman's comments about "bats" appeared calculated to stir up fear.

The army has taken over security from the police but has focused on the protests, not police work. It has been highly praised by the opposition since it moved into Cairo and other urban areas, but Wednesday that relationship seemed to change as the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest opposition group, accused the army of arresting and torturing protesters headed to Tahrir Square.

"We appreciate the Egyptian army's role in protecting protesters," Mohamed Morsy, who has met with Suleiman to discuss the crisis, said at a news conference. "But in some places, protesters are being taken to military camps, and they are being tortured like those from the [police intelligence] tortured people in the past."

He said 70 to 100 people had been tortured "very badly" by the army.

Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit also seemed to signal that a crackdown could be coming, and said he was "amazed" to hear of Vice President Joe Biden's call for Egypt to immediately scrap its harsh "emergency law" aimed at maintaining civil order.

"How can you ask me to sort of disband that emergency law while I'm in difficulty? ... Allow me to have control to stabilize the nation, to stabilize the state, and then we would look into the issue," Abul Gheit said.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Philip J. Crowley said Abul Gheit should not be taken aback by U.S. calls for democratic reform.

"With all due respect to the foreign minister, he should not be amazed — if that's the word that he used — at our call for rescinding the emergency law," Crowley said at a news briefing. "We have been calling for that for years, if not decades."

On Wednesday, about 500 protesters blocked the street in front of the parliament building, some of them having camped there overnight after spillover of Tuesday's massive gathering in Tahrir Square, four blocks away. The government has promised not to forcibly remove demonstrators from Tahrir, but the occupation of new territory increased pressure on the army to act.

The army blocked off Qasr El Ainey Street, the major road into downtown from the south, because it runs by the parliament, creating massive traffic jams even beyond the normal tie-ups.

"It's not OK what you are doing here," Gen. Hassan Ruwaini of the military police told protesters. "If you want to protest, go to Tahrir."

The army has pledged not to attack peaceful protesters, at least in the square, and it is a rare time in modern Egyptian history when people feel free to disregard military orders.

"We are not leaving, he is leaving," chanted 150 young men behind their barricade. It was not clear whether they were referring to Mubarak, the usual focus of that slogan, or the general.

The frustrated officer pulled back from the confrontation, at least for the moment.

Parliament has been a major focus of the opposition's ire because of suspect elections and one-party rule. Lawmakers were told to stay home Wednesday, and the building was closed off.

A correspondent for Al Jazeera television reported that the army had entered the building for the first time in modern history to protect it.

Tahrir Square was surprisingly full of demonstrators Wednesday, which was not scheduled as a major day of protest, a sign of continuing vitality within the movement to remove Mubarak from power.

In another escalation, the opposition called for protests Friday in multiple locations in Cairo, the Muslim day of prayer.

The protesters were defiant after Suleiman warned of a coup if protesters didn't back down, and they vowed to instead expand their protests.

"What Suleiman said was something aggressive, and that means already they have a decision about what to do against us, and they will do it in these next two days," said Mohammed Taman, a spokesman for a coalition of five main youth groups attempting to coordinate the protests.

Taman emphasized that none of those purportedly representing protesters in talks with the

government were legitimate.

"This is very bad; several times on TV they said these guys represent us. This is false. There is no one representing us," he said. "If there is someone from the government who wants to negotiate with us, they should come here.

"We have one request, and we insist on it: Mubarak must leave."

Though not necessarily throwing in their lot with the opposition, labor activists seemed to take advantage of the chaos to issue their own demands.

Health Ministry employees joined the protesters outside the parliament. A few blocks away, journalists were on strike for better pay at the magazine Rose El Yussef and condemned their editors for lavish lifestyles and for supporting Mubarak.

Hundreds of employees of Telecom Egypt protested outside the company's downtown headquarters, demanding higher wages and working conditions.

There are strikes and protests by workers at Egyptian Railway, the Omar Effendi retail stores and the Petrotrade petroleum company. Several other protests by public workers are taking place in the governorates of Giza, Suez, Helwan, Kafr El Dawar and Kafr El Zayat.

Though the majority of laborers are calling for better contracts, working conditions and pay raises, they've also chanted slogans that salute the protests in Tahrir Square.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik was carrying out his duties from the Civil Aviation Ministry headquarters, near Cairo's airport, after demonstrators prevented him from entering the Cabinet building.

In New Valley, a western province, security forces reported that the first sizable anti-Mubarak gathering in the region resulted in clashes between protesters and police Tuesday and Wednesday. Four people were killed and several were wounded by gunfire.

Protesters in the city of Port Said set the city hall on fire after saying the city's governor had ignored their demands for subsidized housing.

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