

BAHRAIN UNREST

Protesters throng square to press demands

Exiled opposition leader to return today

REUTERS, Manama

Bahraini protesters camped out in Manama's Pearl Square pressed demands for a new government yesterday, backed by a teachers' strike that closed many schools.

"No teaching until the government falls," chanted more than 1,500 teachers gathered at the square in the Bahraini capital.

Up to 10,000 demonstrators packed Pearl Square, at the heart of week-long protests led by majority Shi'ites demanding more say in the Sunni-ruled kingdom, a close U.S. and Saudi ally.

Near the group of teachers, a dangerously leaning chair had been erected, representing the government, on top of a box painted blood-red. Arrows were stuck into the chair, which had a rifle strapped to it. They bore labels such as corruption, joblessness, naturalization and the blood of martyrs.

"In the eyes of the people the government has already fallen," said Amir Ahmed, 38, a government oil sector employee.

The opposition is demanding a true constitutional monarchy that gives citizens a greater role in a directly elected government. It also wants the release of political prisoners.

King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa has asked his son, the crown prince, to conduct a dialogue with all parties, but after the bloodshed on the streets, opposition parties are wary.

A Shi'ite opposition leader, tried in absentia in Bahrain for attempting to topple the

government, indicated that he would return home from London today, raising the stakes in the stand-off between the government and its foes.

A status update to his Facebook page said HassanMushaimaa, leader of the Haq Movement for Liberty and Democracy, planned to "see if this leadership is serious about dialogue and if it will arrest him or not."

The Haq movement disputes the legitimacy of the reform process launched by the king a decade ago and boycotts elections. It broke away from Bahrain's main Shi'ite opposition group Wefaq when it took part in a parliamentary poll in 2006.

Haq's leaders have often been arrested in recent years, only to receive royal pardons. Some were rearrested in a crackdown in August, when 25 Shi'ite activists, including 23 now on trial, were charged with trying to overthrow the government violently.

Ibrahim Mattar, a lawmaker of the main Shi'ite Wefaq party, said the crown prince should signal willingness to accept a genuinely constitutional monarchy as a prelude to dialogue.

The demonstrators in Pearl Square were impatient for change.

"The history books will be rewritten. We will sacrifice for the martyrs," said a schoolgirl who addressed the crowd over loudspeakers, referring to the seven people killed in bloody confrontations with the police and army since last Monday.



PHOTO: AFP

Egyptian and Libyan protesters shout slogans, upper left, against Libyan leader Moamer Gaddhafi (portrait) during a demonstration outside the Arab League headquarters in the Egyptian capital Cairo. A Yemeni anti-government protester crosses out a portrait of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, top right, during a demonstration in the capital Sanaa. A mock-up of a ruler's chair is placed at Pearl Square in Manama during anti-government protests yesterday.

Egypt seeks freeze on Mubarak assets

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's prosecutor general yesterday requested a freeze on the foreign assets of Hosni Mubarak and his family, 10 days after the long-time president resigned in the face of a popular uprising.

Abdel Magid Mahmud tasked Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit with contacting foreign countries to seek a freeze on assets held by Mubarak, his wife Suzanne, sons Alaa and Gamal and their wives Heidi Rashek and Khadiga al-Gamal, his office said.

Mubarak is widely thought to have grown wealthy during his three decades in power, although an unidentified legal adviser was quoted by the state-run MENA news agency on Sunday as saying that talk of a multi-billion-dollar fortune was nothing but "a groundless rumour".

Switzerland, which froze Mubarak's assets within hours of his resignation on February 11, said on Sunday that the former president had "tens of millions of francs" in Swiss financial institutions.

"We do not yet know if these funds are legitimate or not," said Swiss foreign ministry Stefan von Below, adding that if they had been illegally obtained, "competent judicial bodies will decide who are the entitled parties".

Twelve people have had their assets pre-emptively frozen by Switzerland, including Mubarak's immediate family members as well as four of his government ministers.

British PM in Cairo for talks

AFP, Cairo

British Prime Minister David Cameron arrived in Cairo yesterday, the first foreign leader in the Egyptian capital since the downfall of longtime president Hosni Mubarak, a British embassy official said.

"We can confirm that the prime minister has arrived," the official told AFP, declining "for security reasons" to disclose what his plans would be or who he would be seeing.

Speaking en route to Cairo, Cameron said: "This is a great opportunity for us to go and talk to those currently running Egypt to make sure this really is a genuine transition from military rule to civilian rule and see what friendly countries like Britain and others in Europe can do to help."

Yemen president stands firm as MPs join protest

Shots fired at demonstrators, death toll hits 12

AFP, Sanaa

Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in power since 1978, said yesterday only defeat at the ballot box will make him quit, even as MPs joined thousands of protesters in Sanaa calling for his departure.

In the country's south, police shot dead a protester in the regional capital, Aden, where protests have raged killing 12 people and wounding dozens since February 16, medics and witnesses said.

"If they want me to quit, I will only leave through the ballot box," Saleh told a news conference as the protesters, including opposition MPs, gathered outside Sanaa University.

"The opposition are raising the level of their demands, some of which are illicit," the Yemeni leader said.

Saleh, whose long reign makes him one of the Middle East's great survivors, said the

protests were "not new," accusing his opponents of having been behind the demonstrations for a while.

Opposition MPs, who vowed to take to the streets in a statement issued on Sunday, joined students who have been protesting for the past nine days.

Security forces surrounded the protesters as they gathered in a nearby square carrying banners declaring "People want change," "People want to overthrow the regime" and "Leave".

The Common Forum, an alliance of parliamentary opposition groups has urged all of its parties on Sunday to "join the protesting youths... in their demonstrations against oppression, tyranny and corruption," in a statement received by AFP.

Responding to Saleh's calls earlier this month to resume dialogue, stalled since October, the parliamentary opposition had refrained from calling for protests since February 3.

China warns over 'jasmine unrest'

BBC ONLINE

China's official in charge of the state security apparatus has warned of the need to find new ways to defuse unrest.

Zhou Yongkang urged senior officials to improve "social management" and "detect conflicts and problems early on", the state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

He was speaking at a weekend seminar which took place as an internet campaign tried to provoke a "jasmine revolution" in China.

Sudan's president 'won't seek re-poll'

AFP, Khartoum

Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir will not stand for re-election, an official of his National Congress Party said yesterday, insisting, however, that he was "not under pressure" from the wave of protests rocking the Arab world.

"I can confirm, 100 percent, that Bashir is not going to run for president in the next election. He will actually give a chance to different personalities to compete for the position," Rabie Abdul Ati told AFP.

"But he is not under pressure... This is not in the context of the change that is happening in the Arab world. It is happening because of the political strategy of the NCP to broaden participation," he added, referring to a meeting of the ruling party's youth wing last week.

Abdul Ati's comments come amid fresh political turmoil in the Arab world, which has already unseated the presidents of Tunisia and neighbouring Egypt, and is now sweeping through Libya, which also shares a border with Sudan.



The 1,559-metre (5,115-foot) Mount Bulusan volcano emits ash into the air as it erupts in the town of Irosin, Sorsogon province in the Philippines yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Thousands flee as Philippine volcano erupts

AFP, Manila

Thousands of people in the Philippines fled their homes as a volcano erupted yesterday, sending a spectacular column of ash high into the sky, residents said.

The eruption of Bulusan, a 1,559-metre (5,115-foot) volcano, turned mid-morning into night for about 20 minutes across largely farming areas around its slopes, regional army spokesman Major Harold Cabuncoc told AFP.

"There was a major ashfall. There was zero visibility," Cabuncoc said.

State volcanologist Ramil Vaquilar told AFP that rumbling sounds accompanied the ash column that rose between two and 2.5 kilometres (1.2-1.6 miles) above the crater.

NEWS IN brief

Five dead after violence in northern Morocco

AFP, Rabat

Five burned bodies were found in a bank set ablaze in the north Moroccan town of Al-Hoceima in unrest that followed weekend demonstrations for change, Interior Minister Taib Cherkaoui said yesterday.

The minister also announced that 128 people, including 115 members of the security forces, were wounded in unrest that erupted in several towns following demonstrations on Sunday to demand political reform.

US official in Cairo in wake of Mubarak downfall

AFP, Cairo

US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns arrived yesterday to take stock of the situation in Egypt 10 days after the downfall of Hosni Mubarak, the US embassy in Cairo said.

Besides meeting leaders of Egypt's interim military-led administration, the Arabic-speaking veteran diplomat is to see representatives of civil society, the embassy said.

In announcing his visit last week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the United States would offer Egypt -- already a big recipient of US aid -- some \$150 million to help its political and economic transition.

Philippine peace talks 'making progress': Norway

AFP, Oslo

Representatives of the Philippine government and communist rebels, who are conducting their first peace negotiations in six years near Oslo, have made progress, the Norwegian facilitator said yesterday.

"They have made some progress," Ture Lundh, the Norwegian ambassador to the Philippines, told AFP.

"The two parties have shown a common will to move forward," he added.

The government and the National Democratic Front (NDF) -- the political arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) -- agreed last month to talks, the first since 2004, in a bid to end the decades-old rebellion which has claimed thousands of lives.

Milan airport terminal evacuated after shooting

AFP, Milan

Flights out of Milan's Malpensa airport were suspended yesterday and a terminal building evacuated after a man smashed his car into the terminal and was shot by a police officer after trying to stab him.

Airport authorities quickly ruled out a terrorist attack.

"A Tunisian man... who was in a car with his wife and three children tried to smash into the terminal," a security source at the airport told AFP.

Suicide blast at Mogadishu police base kills nine

AFP, Mogadishu

A suicide car bomb ripped through a police base in Mogadishu yesterday, killing nine people after a weekend of bloody fighting between pro-government forces and Al Qaeda-inspired insurgents.

According to police sources, at least nine people were killed when the explosives-laden vehicle blew up at the Darwish camp, a site used by a police unit and adjacent to a police academy.

Cyclone kills 15 in Madagascar

AFP, Antananarivo

A tropical cyclone that swept through Madagascar last week has left at least 15 people dead and 20,000 others homeless, the disaster management department said yesterday.

Cyclone Bingiza hit the Indian Ocean island's eastern coast yesterday and drove through the northern and southern regions and before drifting away on Saturday.

A total of 85,000 people were affected by the cyclone that destroyed homes and thousands of acres of rice fields, the National Disaster and Risk Management Bureau said.

Bingiza was the first cyclone to hit Madagascar in the cyclone season that runs from November to April.

Gorbachev slams Putin's 'election arrogance'

AFP, Moscow

The last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev yesterday accused Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin of arrogance over their plan to jointly decide who should run in next year's presidential elections.

President Medvedev and his predecessor and current prime minister Putin have repeatedly said they will sit down and privately decide which of them should run in elections scheduled for March 2012.

The decision could effectively decide the fate of the presidency in a country where the ruling Kremlin party dominates all facets of politics and has unrestricted access to the media.

But Gorbachev -- who turns 80 on March 2 and has been using the added media attention to criticise the country's political course -- said such a decision would contradict all democratic norms.

"It is immodest to say that we will sit down with Dmitry Anatolyevich (Medvedev) and decide," Gorbachev said of Putin.

"I do not like how they are acting. This is not Putin's -- this is the nation's business. This is the decision of those who vote," Gorbachev told reporters.

"We all have to be a little more modest," he said. "Their confidence has grown into overconfidence."

The current and former Russian presidents have not said when they intend to decide which of them should run in 2012.