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Bahrain unrest: Protesters enter symbolic Pearl Square



Protesters were jubilant at entering Pearl Square

Thousands of anti-government protesters in Bahrain have entered Pearl Square, the focal point of protests in the capital Manama.

Jubilant protesters returned after riot police fired tear gas and shotgun rounds before leaving the square. It is unclear how many were injured.

The army, which had guarded the square since clearing it of protesters on Thursday, was earlier ordered out.

The crown prince has been meeting political parties, the BBC understands.

They include the main Shia opposition parties, our correspondent Caroline Hawley reports from Manama.

As demonstrations grew on Saturday, heavily armed riot police fired volleys of tear gas and shotgun rounds as anti-government protesters arrived at the square from all directions, the BBC's Kevin Connolly reported from the city.

The police then pulled out, leaving the square to the jubilant crowd.

The protesters have made the square, a large traffic roundabout, a focal point of demonstrations in recent days.

Mid-East unrest: Bahrain



- ◆ King Hamad, 61, has been in power since 1999
- ◆ Population 800,000; land area 717 sq km, or 100 times smaller than Irish Republic
- ◆ A population with a median age of 30.4 years, and a literacy rate of 91%
- ◆ Youth unemployment at 19.6%
- ◆ Gross national income per head: \$25,420 (World Bank 2009)

They have been increasingly angry at the violent suppression of their protests by the security forces.

At least 50 people were wounded on Friday as the army fired on protesters following the funerals for four killed when troops cleared Pearl Square early on Thursday.

Two people were also killed earlier in the week.

Bahrain's Crown Prince, Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, has called for calm in an effort to hold a national day of mourning for those who have died.

Bahrain is one of several Arab countries to have experienced pro-democracy demonstrations since the fall of long-time Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January. Egypt's Hosni Mubarak was forced from power on 11 February.

The majority Shia population in Bahrain have long said they are discriminated against when it comes to housing and government jobs. They have also been calling for greater political rights from the Sunni royal family.

Earlier, the main Shia opposition bloc, Wefaq, rejected an offer from the king to hold talks aimed at ending the unrest.

Correspondents say leaving the square to the protesters may be a response to US President Barack Obama's call for restraint.