

Egypt activists vow more protests as 1,000 arrested



AFP – Egyptian police arrest a demonstrator in Cairo. Police arrested at least 1,000 people in two days of ...

by Jailan Zayan Jailan Zayan – Thu Jan 27, 5:03 am ET

CAIRO (AFP) – Pro-democracy activists vowed on Thursday to step up the largest anti-government protests in Egypt in three decades, despite mass arrests and mammoth security following two days of street clashes.

The protests against the autocratic rule of President Hosni Mubarak, inspired by the groundbreaking "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia, have sent shockwaves across the region and prompted Washington to prod its long-time ally on democratic reforms.

Events on the streets sent jitters Thursday through Egypt's stock exchange, which suspended trading temporarily after a drop of 6.2 percent in the benchmark EGX 30 index, a day after it fell six percent.

Members of the pro-democracy youth group April 6 Movement said they would defy the ban on demonstrations and take to the streets again on Thursday, while calling for mass demonstrations after Friday's Muslim prayers.

Thursday "will not be a holiday... street action will continue," the group said on its Facebook page.

"We've started and we won't stop," one demonstrator told AFP, even as riot police fanned out across central Cairo.

"To continue what we started on January 25, we will take to the streets to demand the right to life, liberty, dignity and we call on everyone to take to the

streets ... and to keep going until the demands of the Egyptian people have been met," the group said.

Opposition groups circulated SMS messages and posted appeals on social networking site Facebook for fresh demonstrations "to demand the right to live with freedom and dignity".

According to a security official, at least 1,000 people have been detained around the country since the demonstrations started on Tuesday.

Medics have reported the deaths of six people -- four protesters and two policemen -- in violence linked to the protests, with 55 protesters and 15 police injured.

Egyptian opposition figure and former UN nuclear watchdog chief Mohamed ElBaradei, meanwhile, was due back in Egypt from Vienna on Thursday, his family told AFP.

ElBaradei recently told a German magazine that Egyptians should be able to follow the lead set by the toppling of Tunisia's veteran president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

"If the Tunisians have done it, Egyptians should get there too," ElBaradei told Der Spiegel.

Demonstrations in central Cairo continued into the early hours of Thursday, ending when police fired tear gas and made further arrests.

The authorities on Wednesday declared a ban on demonstrations, which police immediately enforced after having on Tuesday, the first day of the protests, stood back to allow the nationwide demonstrations to go ahead.

In running battles Wednesday afternoon and into the night, police chased demonstrators through the streets of a popular commercial district in Cairo, witnesses said.

Protesters responded by throwing rocks at police, damaging several shop fronts in an area near the information ministry.

Protesters in the northeastern port city of Suez threw Molotov cocktails at a government building, setting parts of it on fire, witnesses said.

Others firebombed and occupied the headquarters there of the ruling National Democratic Party.

And dozens were arrested in Egypt's second city of Alexandria as they tried to reach a sea-front square to demonstrate, witnesses said.

The United States, Egypt's chief ally in the Arab world, meanwhile issued a nuanced written statement in Obama's name on Egypt.

"The Egyptian government has an important opportunity to be responsive to the aspirations of the Egyptian people, and pursue political, economic and social reforms that can improve their lives and help Egypt prosper," it said.

"The United States is committed to working with Egypt and the Egyptian people to advance these goals," it added.

The statement also underlined US support for basic democratic freedoms "including the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly".

Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif said the "government is keen to guarantee freedom of expression through legitimate means", but did not elaborate.

The protests are the largest in Egypt since bread riots in 1977, four years before Mubarak came to power.

Among protesters' demands are the departure of the interior minister, whose security forces have been accused of heavy-handedness; an end to a decades-old state of emergency; a rise in minimum wages and an end to rocketing food prices.

Political discontent has been rumbling in Egypt since parliamentary elections in November, which were widely seen as rigged to allow candidates from Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party to record a landslide victory.