

# Egypt set for day of departure

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Eyewitness Khalid Abdalla in Tahrir Square: "Today is by far the largest number of people we have had"

Thousands of protesters are gathering again in the Egyptian capital Cairo to stage a "day of departure" for President Hosni Mubarak.

There is an increased army presence in Tahrir Square, after days of unrest that has led to hundreds of casualties.

Mr Mubarak is under mounting pressure to resign, with the US now calling for an immediate transition of power.

He says such a move would leave Egypt in chaos, but has admitted he is "fed up" with being in power.

In his first interview since anti-government protests began, he told ABC News he would like to resign immediately.

But he repeated his long-held assertion that the country's Islamist opposition - the Muslim Brotherhood - would fill the power vacuum left by his absence.

The protest organisers are demanding that he leave immediately.

They have been angered further by the emergence in recent days of pro-Mubarak gangs - many suspected to be plain clothes police - who have attacked anti-government protesters.

The protesters say they want to put the "last nail in the regime's coffin". The main prayers are at noon local time (1000GMT).

The BBC's Jim Muir in Tahrir Square says a much stronger army presence has been securing the perimeter, but on good terms with the protesters.

Defence Minister Gen Mohamed Hussein Tantawi and other military leaders joined the armed forces in the square on Friday.

Correspondents also say that there are many more tanks and soldiers out on the streets of second city Alexandria than before.

Egypt's health ministry says eight people have been killed and more than 800 injured in the clashes, but the UN estimates that more than 300 people have died since the unrest broke out on 25 January, with about 4,000 hurt.

## **'Meaningful transition'**

Egypt's Vice-President Omar Suleiman has appealed for calm and urged the protesters to accept Mr Mubarak's pledge that he will not stand for election again.

But it has now emerged that the White House has been in talks with Mr Suleiman about how Egypt can begin making a "meaningful transition" to a democratic government that addresses the aspirations of the Egyptian people.

US Vice-President Joe Biden spoke to his Egyptian counterpart on Thursday, say diplomats, a day after Mr Suleiman had similar talks with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

**The New York Times** suggested that among the proposals was a plan for Mr Mubarak to resign immediately and hand power to a military-backed interim government under Mr Suleiman.

Neither the White House nor the state department have directly denied the report.

But a spokesman for the President Barack Obama's National Security Council said it was "time to begin a peaceful, orderly and meaningful transition, with credible, inclusive negotiations".

"We have discussed with the Egyptians a variety of different ways to move that process forward, but all of those decisions must be made by the Egyptian people," said Tommy Vietor.

The BBC's Mark Mardell in Washington says other reports suggest the US plan has already been rebuffed in Egypt, and that the administration has been surprised by the attitude of the military and Mr Suleiman.

The reports say officials believe Mr Suleiman was aware of the apparent campaign in recent days to intimidate the opposition, and are now wondering whether he is the right man to lead an interim government, says our correspondent.

### **'Outrageous' violence**

The crisis in Egypt has intensified in recent days as supporters of Mr Mubarak have begun attacking protesters in the capital.

Stones were thrown on both sides, and there were reports of gunfire, while footage has emerged of vehicles being driven at speed through crowds of protesters.

ABC's Christiane Amanpour: "I had a 30 minute meeting with President Mubarak"



Foreign journalists reporting for several organisations have been attacked, with Mubarak supporters storming a number of Cairo hotels.

The army, which has said the protests are legitimate, has been trying to keep the two sides apart but appeared to have failed to control the crowds.

Late in the evening, a number of political activists were arrested by military police, as were representatives of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Tens of thousands of people remained in central Cairo after dark on Thursday, some involved in running battles with Mubarak supporters.

The attacks have drawn condemnation from Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, as well as UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

"Let me be totally clear: this is outrageous and totally unacceptable, it must stop now," Mr Ban said.

In his interview with ABC News, Mr Mubarak denied that his administration was behind the violence of the last two days but said it had troubled him.

The BBC's Kevin Connolly in Cairo said very few Egyptians will accept that version of events.

But the interview gave a fascinating insight into what is going on in the president's mind as he surveys the chaos in the capital, says our correspondent.

Mr Mubarak was speaking in the presidential palace, with his son Gamal at his side.

"I never intended to run [for president] again," Mr Mubarak said. "I never intended Gamal to be president after me."

#### **At the scene**



**Jim Muir** BBC News, Tahrir Square

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The pro-Mubarak element seems to have disappeared at least for the moment and the army has a cordon between the two sides. It is holding a ring and letting people in. The numbers are building up and of course people here are expecting a big day.

The mood is very relaxed. I've got hundreds of people around me who have spent a long time here, many of them are sleeping because they are exhausted, others are sitting chatting in the sunshine.

There was a false alarm a short while ago. When they think they are coming under attack they bang on railings with metal bars to attract attention and the lads start running to that spot. But the sense of imminent attack has now eased. They do feel this is coming to a climax and I think they're feeling the shift within the Egyptian ruling leadership.

*Most people here do have confidence in the army as a kind of neutral institution. I believe there is a struggle going on between elements loyal to the regime, perhaps loyal to the previous interior minister who was fired and who has now had his assets frozen and is not allowed to leave the country.*

*Some people believe the attacks were motivated by his people trying to extract revenge, to show there is still a power and to punish the other part of the establishment for firing him.*

SOURCE: BBC