

Egypt's Brotherhood to enter crisis talks

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The BBC's Jim Muir: "Protesters blocked the army from advancing into Tahrir Square and spent the night sleeping under the tracks of tanks"

Egypt's most influential opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, says it will enter talks with officials on ending the country's political crisis.

The group said Sunday's talks would assess how far the government was ready to "accept the demands of the people".

The negotiations would be the first ever to be held between the government and the officially banned Brotherhood.

Meanwhile many banks are opening for the first time in a week, amid fears of panic withdrawals.

Divided?

President Hosni Mubarak has rejected protesters' demands that he quit now, as he says it would cause chaos.

But Mr Mubarak - who has been in office since 1981 and has tolerated little dissent - has said he will not stand in elections due in September.

Huge crowds have been on the streets of Cairo and other cities in the past two weeks demanding his immediate resignation and calling for democratic reforms.

The Muslim Brotherhood had previously said it would not take part in negotiations between the government and opposition groups.

But a spokesman told Reuters: "We have decided to engage in a round of dialogue to ascertain the seriousness of officials towards the demands of the people and their willingness to respond to them."

A spokesman told the AFP news agency the dialogue was also aimed at ending "foreign or regional interference" in the situation.

The Islamist group is Egypt's most influential and well-organised opposition but it remains officially banned and its members and leaders have been subject to frequent repression.

Mr Mubarak has blamed it for the unrest and said that if he leaves, the group will exploit the ensuing political chaos.

The Muslim Brotherhood denies accusations that it is seeking to create an Islamist state in Egypt.

The BBC's Jon Leyne, in Cairo, says the Brotherhood is undoubtedly a force in Egypt but it is itself divided and unclear in its intentions. After an election it may be part of a coalition.

He says that although the Brotherhood has indicated it will only talk about Mr Mubarak's departure, the talks are still a gamble - its prestige has been damaged by its slowness to endorse the past two weeks of demonstrations and there is deep scepticism about the talks in the ranks of the protesters.

Our correspondent says the government would like to see the protesters isolated by those who simply want to get back to work, but with what the demonstrators have been subjected to, there is no sign of them giving up.

The army had tried to take back part of Cairo's Tahrir Square on Saturday but were rebuffed by protesters.

On Sunday a Coptic Christian Mass was celebrated in the square as a show of interfaith solidarity.

Economic woes

Some 340 bank branches, including about 150 in Cairo, were scheduled to open at 1000 local time (0800 GMT).

Long queues formed at some for the brief opening period - the banks were to close again at 1330 local time.



Protesters are remaining in Tahrir Square day and night

The central bank is releasing some of its \$36bn in official foreign reserves to cover withdrawals, amid fears Egyptians will be panicked into taking out their savings.

Deputy central bank governor Hisham Ramez has said he is confident all transactions will be honoured.

The government is seeking to revive an economy said to be losing at least \$310m (£192m) a day.

Many shops, factories and the stock exchange have been closed for days, and basic goods have been running short.

Correspondents say many Egyptians have been wondering how quickly daily life will return to normal regardless of the outcome of the struggle for power.

On Saturday, the president met the prime minister, finance minister, oil minister and trade and industry minister, along with the central bank governor to discuss the economic situation.

Resignations

The US - a key ally of the Mubarak government - has called for a swift transition of power, although it has not explicitly told Mr Mubarak to leave.

It has also encouraged all parties to fully engage in talks with opposition groups.

But there was confusion on Saturday after US special envoy Frank Wisner, who was sent by President Barack Obama to Cairo apparently to urge Mr Mubarak to announce his departure, said he thought Mr Mubarak "must stay in office" to oversee the transition, saying his "continued leadership is critical".

The US state department later distanced itself from the comments, saying they were Mr Wisner's own and were not co-ordinated with the US government.

The leadership of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) resigned en masse on Friday, apparently in response to the protests.

Two of Mr Mubarak's allies, including his son Gamal, lost their posts while Hossam Badrawi was appointed secretary general.

At the scene



Ian Pannell BBC News, Cairo

The night has been pretty calm - there has been noise at the edge of Tahrir Square but that's mainly the sound of Cairo getting back to business this morning. We have been told the banks will reopen and business will be back - there's a great deal of concern about the impact of all this on the economy and there's an attempt by the government to try to present business as usual and see what impact that has on the protesters.

The talks with the Muslim Brotherhood will undoubtedly be seen as significant - there are many in the square who are, if not members, then supporters of the Brotherhood. The government has never before sat down and talked with the Muslim Brotherhood - over the past three decades it marginalised them, imprisoned them and harried them.

The talks are tentative - the Brotherhood wants to see if the government will accept the demands of the people that President Mubarak go - the question is, is there any middle ground that will be acceptable?