
Armenian Opposition Ends Protest After State Of Emergency Declared

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Armenia's opposition ended a standoff with riot police in the capital Yerevan on Sunday after the government declared a state of emergency and mobilised the army in response to the worst unrest in a decade, Reuters reported. Violent clashes killed 8 protesters and left 33 police injured.

Authorities imposed a state of emergency late Saturday following clashes between riot police and protesters that also left 33 police injured. A spokeswoman for the foreign ministry told AFP, seven civilians and one police officer had been killed. One police officer was in critical condition and 17 had been hospitalised for gunshot wounds, she said.

"The police are calling on all citizens to be careful, to hold back and to obey all the rules of the state of emergency," a police statement read. A dozen armoured personnel carriers and about 100 soldiers stood guard outside the main government building and foreign ministry. Several tanks could be seen at the scene of the nighttime clashes.

The last protestors dispersed during the night, but burnt-out cars, stones and poles still littered the streets. The city was calm Sunday and shops and cafes around Yerevan were open as residents walked and examined the damage done overnight.

The state of emergency will be in effect in the capital until March 20 under a decree signed by President Robert Kocharian. The state of emergency bans public demonstrations and requires the media to only publish or broadcast information from government sources. Armenia's National Assembly voted overnight to support the measure and called in a decree for "wisdom and restraint... so that life in the country can return quickly to normal."

The violence began early Saturday when riot police cleared a central square where protestors had been camped since a February 19 presidential election won by Kocharian's ally, Prime Minister Serzh Sarkisian. The runner-up, opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrosian, said he had been placed under house arrest, although the government denied this. Between 6,000 and 8,000 demonstrators quickly regrouped in another square. When police tried to disperse them after nightfall the protestors fought back with petrol bombs, sticks and stones.

Police used tear gas and fired live ammunition into the air.

Protestors finally left the streets after an appeal by their leaders.

A police spokesman said eight police officers had suffered gunshot wounds during the unrest and that several were in a serious condition. Several protestors could be seen with head injuries and burns, but there was no official information on casualties among the demonstrators.

Ter-Petrosian's spokesman blamed authorities for the unrest. "The authorities are entirely responsible for these clashes," spokesman Arman Musinian said. "We said that for the situation to be resolved peacefully it was necessary for Levon Ter-Petrosian to be able to speak with his supporters."

The protestors had massed in Yerevan Saturday for an 11th consecutive day protesting alleged rigging of the presidential vote -- which Europe's main

election monitoring organisation said "mostly" met international standards.

In a statement Saturday, the current chairman of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Finnish Foreign Minister Ilkka Kanerva, condemned the use of force against demonstrators.

Official results gave 52.9 percent of the vote to Sarkisian and 21.5 percent to Ter-Petrosian.
