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# At Least Eight Killed In Armenian Post-Election Unrest

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At least eight people were killed and hundreds of others injured in the violent standoff between security forces and thousands of opposition protesters in Yerevan that ended early Sunday following a state of emergency declared by President Robert Kocharian.

The Armenian police reported the death toll, citing information received from the Ministry of Health. A police statement issued early in the morning did not identify any of the victims, suggesting that all of them were protesters.

Five of them were identified by Armenia's Office of the Prosecutor-General later in the day.

The law-enforcement agency said it is investigating the circumstances of their deaths. It added that 33 police officers and interior troops were hospitalized from the scene of the opposition protest with various injuries. Health Minister Harutiun Kushkian put the total number of people treated in hospitals on Saturday at 230.

The standoff ended at around 4 a.m. local time after the top opposition leader, Levon Ter-Petrosian, urged his supporters to go home, citing the state of emergency imposed by Kocharian. "I do not want any victims and clashes between police and innocent people. That is why I am asking you to leave," Ter-Petrosian said in a message read out to more than 2,000 people that barricaded themselves outside the Yerevan mayor's office.

According to Reuters news agency, most of the crowd headed away from the square but a group of around 60 people refused to go home and set fire to abandoned police vehicles. Some of them accused the former Armenian president of being a traitor. Gunshots in downtown Yerevan could be heard after that.

"We will continue our political struggle for democracy and rule of law," Ter-Petrosian's election campaign office said in a separate statement. An official there said riot police did not attack the dispersing crowd or arrest any of the former president's associates who organized the rally on Saturday.

The police statement did not report any high-profile arrests. But it said law-enforcement authorities are taking measures to identify and arrest organizers and participants of the "mass riots."

The rally began spontaneously at Saturday noon after Ter-Petrosian was placed under de facto house arrest following the break-up of his supporters' non-stop sit-in Yerevan's Liberty Square. Thousands of people had been keeping overnight vigils there in protest against the official results of the February 19 presidential election that gave victory to Prime Minister Serzh Sarkisian. Ter-Petrosian, who was Sarkisian's main challenger, rejects those results as fraudulent.

The opposition leader appealed to his supporters in the early hours of the morning as Armenian army units backed by light tanks and armored personnel vehicles moved into the city center to help riot police disperse his supporters who occupied a major street junction outside the Yerevan municipality and the French Embassy in Armenia.

The troops took positions near the area shortly after Kocharian declared emergency rule late Saturday. He pointed to violent clashes that broke out

between the protesters and riot police on one of several streets leading to the site of the protest at approximately 9:10 p.m. local time

"They are using weapons and we are obliged to ensure the security of our citizens," Kocharian told a late-night news conference. He claimed that opposition supporters provoked the violence by firing gunshots and wounding eight police officers.

An RFE/RL correspondent at the scene did not see any demonstrators carrying weapons and reported that security forces fired tracer bullets in the air for more than 40 minutes in an apparent bid to scare away more than 10,000 people barricaded there at that time. One eyewitness said he saw two protesters shot dead on the spot.

Buoyed by their leaders, the demonstrators responded to the clatter of automatic gunfire with "Levon! Levon!" and "Victory! Victory!" chants. "Everyone must stay where they are," Nikol Pashinian, one of the opposition leaders, told them. "Don't move." "Dear people, they are simply trying to spread panic," said another speaker, Miasnik Malkhasian. "So please don't panic."

As Pashinian and Malkhasian spoke, riot police charged towards the crowd but were repelled and forced to flee the scene by groups of men wielding metal bars and sticks and throwing stones. Several police vehicles were set on fire in the process. Some of the angry protesters went on to loot a nearby food supermarket and burned down cars parked nearby.

Opposition leaders who organized the rally disavowed and condemned these actions, blaming them on government "provocateurs." "We have nothing to do with that," said Pashinian. "The authorities themselves are destabilizing the situation."

In a separate address to the nation, Kocharian said the violence was the main reason why he decided to declare the 20-day state of emergency. The extraordinary move means that all rallies and other public gatherings will be banned in Yerevan until March 20. It also places serious restrictions on press freedom, with local media outlets allowed to report only official news communiques.

There were conflicting reports about the number of opposition activists and other protesters arrested since Saturday morning. The Prosecutor-General's Office said 55 people were detained during the unrest, while police claimed to have arrested more than 40 participants of the looting overnight.

But according to Human Rights Watch, the number of detainees may have exceeded 100 during the break-up of the Liberty Square sit-in alone. The New York-based watchdog condemned the Armenian authorities the use of "excessive force" against peaceful demonstrators.

"The Armenian government should refrain from using violence and make clear that it won't tolerate excessive use of force by police," Holly Cartner, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement. "A political crisis doesn't give the government carte blanche in how it responds to demonstrators."

Stepan Demirchian, a top opposition leader and Ter-Petrosian ally, the former president would have averted bloodshed had the authorities allowed him to leave his house and address the protesters. "Things would not have ended like that if Levon Ter-Petrosian had been allowed to join his people," he said. "The people would have calmed down."

The authorities claimed on Saturday that Ter-Petrosian was never placed

under house arrest, a measure which is not allowed by Armenian law.

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