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Big crowds in east of Libya defy police crackdown

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TRIPOLI (Reuters) - Thousands protested in Libya's second city, Benghazi, on Friday in the worst unrest of Muammar Gaddafi's four decades in power, and Amnesty International said 46 people had been killed in a three-day police crackdown.

Protests fired by uprisings in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt have produced unprecedented scenes in the oil exporting country, but tight government control and media restrictions reduced the amount of information emerging to a trickle.

Amnesty quoted sources at a hospital in Benghazi, the focus for the violence, as saying the most common injuries were gunshot wounds to the head, chest and neck. Officials have given no death toll, or commented directly on the unrest.

"This alarming rise in the death toll, and the reported nature of the victims' injuries, strongly suggests that security forces are permitted lethal use of force against unarmed protesters calling for political change," Amnesty said.

"The Libyan authorities must immediately rein in their security forces. Those responsible for unlawful killings and excessive force...must be identified and brought to justice."

The privately-owned Quryna newspaper said that in Benghazi thousands of residents gathered for the funeral processions of 14 protesters killed in clashes there. Thousands more gathered in front of Benghazi court building.

Opposition activists said protesters were fighting troops for control of the nearby town of Al Bayda, scene of some of the worst violence over the past two days, where townspeople said they were burying 14 people who were killed in earlier clashes.

Residents said that by evening the streets were calm but there were conflicting accounts about whether opposition activists or security forces were in control of the town.

U.S. President Barack Obama said he was "deeply concerned" about reports of violence from Bahrain, a close U.S. ally, Libya and Yemen and urged governments to show restraint in dealing with protesters.

Ashour Shamis, a London-based Libyan journalist, said protesters had stormed Benghazi's Kuwafiyah prison on Friday and freed dozens of political prisoners. Quryna said 1,000 prisoners had escaped and 150 had been recaptured.

The unrest though was not on a national scale with most protests confined to the east around Benghazi, where support for Gaddafi has traditionally been weak. There were no reliable reports of major protests elsewhere, and state media said there had been pro-Gaddafi rallies in the capital.

CALM IN TRIPOLI

The Libyan leader appeared in the early hours of Friday briefly at Green Square in the center of Tripoli, surrounded by crowds of supporters shouting "He is our leader!" and "We follow your path!" Gaddafi did not speak.

Quryna newspaper quoted unnamed sources as saying the General Peoples Congress, or parliament, would adopt a "major shift" in government policy including appointing new people to senior positions. It gave no details and the sources could not be clarified.

A sermon at Friday prayers in Tripoli, broadcast on state television, urged people to ignore reports in foreign media "which doesn't want our country to be peaceful, which ... is the aim of Zionism and imperialism, to divide our country."

Text messages sent to mobile phone subscribers thanked people who ignored calls to join protests. "We congratulate our towns which understood that interfering with national unity threatens the future of generations," it said.

Two people in Benghazi, which is about 1,000 km (600 miles) east of Tripoli, told Reuters early in the day that Saadi Gaddafi, a son of the Libyan leader and ex-professional soccer player in Italy, had taken over command of the city.

Libya, holder of the Arab League's rotating presidency, said it was postponing a summit planned for Iraq in March, citing "circumstances in the Arab world." But the league's secretariat said it had received no formal notification.

Libya-watchers say the situation is different from Egypt, because Gaddafi has oil cash to smooth over social problems. Gaddafi is respected in much of the country, though less so in the Cyrenaica region around Benghazi.

"For sure there is no national uprising," said Noman Benotman, a former opposition Libyan Islamist who is based in Britain but is currently in Tripoli. "I don't think Libya is comparable to Egypt or Tunisia. Gaddafi would fight to the very last moment," he said by telephone from the Libyan capital.

(Additional reporting by Hamid Ould Ahmed in Algiers, [William Maclean](#) in London and Geneva bureau; writing by [Christian Lowe](#); editing by [Ralph Boulton](#))

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