

Eyewitness: Bishkek Unrest

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Kyrgyz journalist recounts confrontation between protesters and government troops on the streets of Bishkek.

I joined the column of protesters as it reached the Central Department Store in Bishkek at 13.30 on April 7. It was led by a group of young men aged between 18 and 25, some of them holding blue and red flags representing the opposition - blue for the Social Democratic Party and red for the Ata Meken party.

They looked organised and there were no disturbances around the store. The column was heading to Ala-Too square in the centre of Bishkek.

I was waiting for the arrival of the demonstrators with a group of ordinary residents including taxi drivers and small traders who were happy to welcome them and join their ranks.

These Bishkek residents came to the city centre to catch the protesters after they witnessed how demonstrators had clashed with the police earlier and forced the police to back off.

One of them told me that protesters disarmed some of the policemen, also taking their riot shields and bullet-proof vests. Word of this spread quickly across the city and had a galvanising effect on people's mood.

On the way to Ala -Too some bystanders joined the column, among them university teachers and writers. Some of them told me of their deep dissatisfaction with the policies of deposed president Kurmanbek Bakiev.

When the group reached Ala-Too square it was confronted by the police, some of whom were armed with machine guns, others with protective shields and batons.

Police used teargas and smoke grenades but this did not deter the demonstrators, who started to throw stones at them. It was at this moment that gunshots and machine gun rounds were heard. Although part of the crowd dispersed, a core of protesters stayed put.

It was raining. People started to feel the effects of the teargas, but encouraged by new protesters coming in from behind, those at the front just rubbed their eyes and stood their ground.

Clashes were taking place in several areas. By about 14.00, people were trying to take over the White House, which houses the president's office. Behind the high railings around the building, a group of security forces armed with machine guns could be seen. On the roof of the White House, I spotted special forces officers with rifles.

Every attempt by demonstrators to get to the building was met with gunfire. Despite the danger, the constant sound of shooting seemed to bring an adrenalin rush to the young male protesters. Their faces bore expressions of determination and bravery.

Fifteen minutes later, a new group of about ten protestors arrived from the direction of Abdrakhmanov Street. Some had machine guns, apparently weapons taken from the police after the morning protest.

The clashes intensified. I believe it was at this moment that the first injuries happened.

After another 15 minutes of shooting, the mood in the crowd started to change. Many were frightened. People looked lost, their aggression giving way to feelings of dismay. There was clearly no central control behind the protesters.

Young people, the core of the demonstration, were angered by the sight of the blood of their fellow protesters and seemed determined to go on at any cost.

It was remarkable that the demonstrators were so determined to overthrow Bakiev that they were prepared to ignore the danger they were in. I remember thinking that this must be what war is like.

I went to the hospital nearby where the first casualties started arriving at 14.45. The medical staff were unprepared but their professionalism soon kicked in and the first wounded person was sent to the operating theatre.

At 14.50 the first dead body, a man, was delivered to the hospital. A bullet had entered his chest and exited his right side. The number of wounded began rising rapidly. The dead, too, mostly young people hit by gunshots to the head, chest and legs. I saw a young girl among them.

According to eyewitnesses, they were hit by snipers from the windows and roof of the White House. People's anger was increasing. There was a lot blood and the situation was out of control. Protesters organised themselves to help the wounded.

At the hospital, I helped doctors to move the wounded. When I left it was with a deep feeling of compassion for those who had died and a sense that Bakiev was not worth these young people's lives.

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