

Street Battles Rock Georgian Capital

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State of emergency to be imposed across Georgia as government uses force to disperse opposition demonstrations.

Tbilisi sank into chaos and violence on November 7, with hundreds of people reported injured after police used force to break up mass protests in the Georgian capital.

Late in the evening, President Mikheil Saakashvili declared a state of emergency across Georgia. Prime Minister Zurab Nogaideli had early announced that emergency rule would only apply to the capital. For the period that the measure is in place - it requires parliamentary assent before it comes into effect - all political protests will be banned and there will be restrictions on the media.

The government accused Russia of fomenting the protests, while opposition figures and Georgia's human rights ombudsman said the Saakashvili administration had done serious harm to its democratic credentials.

The Imedi television channel, which has been the main media outlet for this wave of opposition activity, was dramatically pulled off the air in the middle of its evening schedule after police units burst into the building. Announcers told viewers that the police were on their way and to expect the broadcast to be cut short. Then the screens went blank.

Imedi journalists said afterwards that employees had been ordered to lie on the floor with their hands on their heads, and their mobile phones were taken from them.

The controlling stake in Imedi was sold by its previous owner, Georgian magnate Badri Patarkatsishvili, to Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation last week.

TEAR GAS AND WATER CANNON USED IN RUNNING BATTLES

Five days of protests in Tbilisi descended into disorder early on the morning of November 7, with police in black balaclavas and gas-masks using tear gas, truncheons and water cannon to break up rallies at three locations in central Tbilisi.

Throughout the day, groups of opposition supporters and police moved through the city, engaging in sporadic skirmishes with one another. By nightfall, the protestors had been broken up into smaller groups, but the fighting was continuing.

The violence was a stark contrast to the peaceful protests that led to the Rose Revolution of November 2003. At that time, Saakashvili and his allies were carried to power in a bloodless chain of events.

This time, things have been different. In the morning, police began moving in to break up the rallies as around 100 protesters including the hunger-strikers stood in front of the parliament building on Rustaveli Avenue, Tbilisi's main thoroughfare.

City police chief Giorgi Gegechkori said the action followed calls for the road to be reopened to traffic. "Demonstrators have a right to hold a protest, but they should not obstruct the traffic," he said.

Mayor Giorgi Ugulava added that "every citizen is entitled to freely express his opinion, but only on the pedestrian part of the street".

He said official permission had been given only for the first day of protests, on November 2.

Angered by the police actions, thousands of opposition supporters gathered in front of parliament. They managed to break through a police cordon and blocked the avenue again.

As riot squads intervened, protesters tried to regroup near the Philharmonia building and in Rike Square in the old part of the city, but they were again driven away by the police.

"When they [the police] released the tear gas, people started panicking, I nearly fainted, and everybody rushed for a place to hide," said Marina Chumburidze in a voice full of emotion. "It was terrible".

Trying to escape the thick, choking fumes, people fled down narrow side-streets. All the shops and cafes had already closed, and a few demonstrators broke down their doors to get away.

Georgia's human rights ombudsman Sozar Subari, who was assaulted during the violence, said the police had committed grave abuses of human rights.

"Today Georgia turned off the path of being a 'beacon of democracy' down the road of being a country where human rights count for nothing," said Subari. "I saw people who'd fallen on the ground being brutally beaten with truncheons. I too was beaten - deliberately, because they knew that I am a public defender, because I had tried to save the people who were there."

People were especially frightened by the water cannon trucks, which they mistook for tanks. The police also used high-pitched acoustic crowd-control devices, which added to the constant noise of ambulance sirens.

Many of the demonstrators tried to resist by throwing stones and plastic water-bottles at the ranks of police advancing on them. Television channels broadcast pictures showing furious protestors beating a riot policeman who fell into their hands.

By evening, Rustaveli Avenue looked like a battlefield. The ground was littered with empty blue tear gas canisters and rubber bullets. A shattered police car stood in the centre of Rustaveli Avenue; even its red-and-blue beacon was smashed.

PRESIDENT ACCUSES MOSCOW OF ENCOURAGING HIS OPPONENTS

The authorities have suggested that Moscow has been encouraging the opposition as a way of destabilising Saakashvili's administration.

In a televised address on the evening of November 7, President Mikheil Saakashvili blamed Russia's FSB intelligence service for the events unfolding in Tbilisi.

"Russia's foreign intelligence service and its agents have become very active in Georgia recently," he said. "We had information in advance that there was a plot to overthrow the Georgian government at the end of the year".

He said that "several employees of the Russian embassy who are engaged as agents have been declared persona non-grata and will be leaving the Georgia in the next few days".

The interior ministry's press service made public some audio and video tapes of leading opposition figures meeting representatives of the Russian embassy in Georgia, who the ministry said were secret service officers.

Georgia has recalled its ambassador to Moscow, Irakli Chubinishvili.

Saakashvili said he was still ready for dialogue, but insisted that police had had no option but to use force. "The law-enforcement agencies acted the way the police in any developed democratic country would act under the circumstances," he said.

The Georgian opposition, meanwhile, is drawing parallels with the events of April 9, 1989, when Soviet troops broke up a pro-independence rally in the centre of Tbilisi and 20 people, 18 of them women, were killed.

"The people wanted us to carry out a new revolution," said People's Party leader Koba Davitashvili. "We tried to keep the process peaceful. But Saakashvili, [government adviser Giga] Bokeria and people who do not belong in this country want to hang on to power even if it costs blood."

The head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Ilia II, is calling for dialogue.

"I think there's only one way, and that is a dialogue between the government and opposition," he said. "And if the two sides so wish, we can take part in this dialogue as well. I want to address the whole of Georgia, all citizens, and say that we must keep our composure and do our utmost to keep our country on the path of peace."

The speaker of the Georgian parliament, Nino Burjanadze, said that after opposition leaders demanded a meeting with her to discuss ways out of the crisis, they refused to meet her.

A large part of central Tbilisi remains cordoned off by police. Pro-government supporters rallied in front of the state chancellery building, chanting “Misha! Misha!” But Burjanadze called on them to disperse so as to ease tensions.

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