

## US and Egypt Square off Over Protesters' Demands

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Interviewed by broadcaster PBS, Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit -- a survivor of the reshuffle Mubarak undertook in a vain attempt to staunch the protests -- said he was "amazed" by Vice President Joe Biden, who had urged an immediate end to the emergency law Mubarak has long used to curb opposition.

"When you speak about prompt, immediate, now -- as if you are imposing on a great country like Egypt, a great friend that has always maintained the best of relationship with the United States -- you are imposing your will on him," Aboul Gheit said.

The new friction in an alliance long nurtured with billions of dollars in US aid was a reminder of how much has changed in Cairo in two weeks, of how much is uncertain both of Egypt's future and the future of US influence over a Middle East whose autocratic rulers are struggling to contain social discontent.

The benchmark Brent crude oil price rose nearly 2 percent on Wednesday, ending the day at \$101.82.

### US DILEMMA

Since protests began on January 25, partly inspired by the overthrow of another Arab strongman in Tunisia, US President Barack Obama's administration has trodden a sometimes hazy line between support for a key ally in Washington's conflict with militant Islam and backing for those demanding democracy.

It has stopped short of endorsing calls for Mubarak, 82, to quit immediately. He said last week he would step down in September when an election is due. But US officials have also voiced irritation with the pace of promised reforms, supporting the protesters in their hope of immediate, concrete change.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs noted that the number of Egyptians on the streets still appeared to be growing:

"What you see happening on the streets of Cairo is not all that surprising when you see the lack of steps that their government has taken to meet their concerns," he said.

"The Egyptian government is going to have to take some real, concrete steps in order to meet the threshold that the people of Egypt, that they represent, require from their government."

A day after one of the biggest protests so far in the capital, the main focus of the opposition, Tahrir, or Liberation, Square remained crowded. Organizers were already looking forward to another major push on the streets on Friday.

Karam Mohamed, from Beheira province in the Nile Delta, said the protests were growing: "We are putting pressure on them little by little and in the end they will fall," he said.

Protesters said the Organizers were working on plans to move on to the state radio and television building on Friday.

Hundreds of others consolidated a new encampment on the street outside parliament. On the building's main gate hung a sign reading: "Closed until the regime falls."

### VIOLENCE

Four people were killed and several suffered gunshot wounds in clashes between security forces and some 3,000 protesters in a desert province far from Cairo on Tuesday and Wednesday.

It appeared to be the most serious such clash with official forces since January 28, when police all but disappeared from Egyptian streets after they had beaten, teargassed and fired on protesters. Last week, there was bloodshed in Cairo when Mubarak loyalists in plain clothes attacked protesters.

The armed forces, from whose ranks Egypt's presidents have been drawn for 59 years, have a key role to play.

US officials have praised the way the army has permitted and, largely, protected anti-government demonstrations -- a point cited in defense of continuing aid from Washington even as relations with Mubarak's government deteriorate.

Alexander Vershbow, US assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, told a conference in Israel:

"What we are focusing on right now is the stabilizing role of the military as an institution that really emanates from the people, that is playing an impartial, neutral role in the current situation and which has managed to maintain the respect of the Egyptians, whatever their political orientation."

New Vice President Omar Suleiman, a former general and intelligence chief, has been spearheading talks with opposition groups including the Islamist movement the Muslim Brotherhood. Criticized in Washington for suggesting this week that Egypt was not ready for democracy, Suleiman has now said there is a road map to hand over power. But protesters have been unmoved.

A constitutional committee, appointed by Mubarak, has agreed on six articles that should be amended and said further articles could also be changed, the official news agency reported.

The articles including those governing presidential elections and terms of office. Opposition groups do not want new elections held under what they say are unfair existing laws.

The Muslim Brotherhood said "real talks" on handing over power had yet to begin. It said it was sticking to its demand that Mubarak step aside immediately.

Among those who have joined that call has been Ahmed Zewail, a Nobel physics laureate who has long complained of corruption and stifling bureaucracy under Mubarak: "He should step down tomorrow and allow for a transitional government," Zewail told Reuters in an interview.

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