

Protests For, Against Government Continue Throughout Iran

Thousands of pro-government Iranians have rallied in cities across the country for a fourth day in a show of support for the clerical leadership, while antigovernment protests reportedly continued in at least nine cities across the country, including the capital, Tehran.

Amid a backdrop of diplomatic maneuvering, state television showed footage of January 6 pro-government rallies that were held in cities including Amol, Semnan, and Shadegan, with government supporters waving Iranian flags and chanting “Death to America,” “Death to Israel,” and “Death to Britain.”

More than a week of unrest has seen 22 people die and more than 1,700 arrested, according to reports, in the biggest antigovernment protests for nearly a decade. The Iranian government has blamed the protests on its “enemies.”

Various Iranian officials said on January 6 that hundreds of detainees — including many students and other young people — had been released, some after agreeing to sign a pledge not to “re-offend,” the semiofficial ISNA news agency reported.

Meanwhile, the Iranian parliament has called a special session for January 7 to discuss the antigovernment protests in dozens of towns and cities that have rocked the country daily since December 28.

The session, which was called by a reformist faction of lawmakers, is to look at the causes of the unrest.

ISNA said the interior minister, chief of Iran’s intelligence agency, and security council head are scheduled to attend the closed-door parliament meeting.

Requests by reformists that protesters who have been jailed should have access to legal assistance is also due to be discussed.

The unrest continued in the capital at night on January 5-6, with social-media footage showing gatherings in Tehran despite a large police presence.

RFE/RL’s Radio Farda also obtained credible reports on January 6 from sources in

Iran about overnight demonstrations against Iran's clerical rulers in Takestan, Arak, Masjed Soleiman, Mashhad, Qazvin, Rasht, Lahijan and Khomein, the birthplace of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic republic.

In a rebuke to Iranian government claims that the widespread demonstrations had been organized and/or instigated by foreigners, a group of 16 prominent reformist figures living in Iran issued a statement rejecting that claim.

In the January 6 statement, the signatories said, "Despite the fact the enemies of the country always try to take advantage of such events, we should know that any kind of foreign interference would not be possible without the existence of internal conditions."

They added that in addition to the government claim of foreign involvement being "an insult" to Iranians, it leads to "negligence toward the real causes of the protests."

The reformist letter also went on to condemn "American interference," especially of President Donald Trump, in the "internal affairs of Iran."

Most of the signatories to the statement are former officials or parliamentarians from the time of President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005).

There were also numerous demonstration around the world by Iranian emigres in front of Iranian embassies. Eight people were arrested in The Hague after breaking into the Iranian Embassy during a protest.

Hundreds of demonstrators rallied in the German cities of Berlin and Hamburg on January 6 in support of the Iranian protesters.

In the capital, Berlin, some 1,300 people gathered at the Brandenburg Gate, with some supporters of being bused in from Hanover, Hamburg, Cologne, and other regions, according to organizers.

Rallies were also reported in Stockholm, London, and Paris in support of the protesters.

The rallies on January 5 came as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley opened an emergency session of the UN Security Council with an impassioned plea for "brave" Iranian demonstrators, saying they are "risking their

lives” to assert their rights to criticize the government and pursue a better life.

“The Iranian people are rising up in over 79 locations throughout the country,” Haley said. “It is a powerful exhibition of brave people who have become so fed up with their oppressive government that they are willing to risk their lives in protest.

“The Iranian regime is finally on notice: The world will be watching what you do,” she said.

But Russia’s ambassador to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, said the United States was “abusing the platform of the Security Council” with a “bogus” pretext to interfere in the domestic affairs of a member nation, in comments that almost echoed those of the Iranian ambassador to the UN.

“The true underlying reason for convening today’s session lies not in attempts to protect the human rights and interests of Iranian people but in a veiled attempt to use the current moment to continue the line towards derailing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which aims to settle the situation around Iran’s nuclear program,” Nebenzya said.

Iranian UN Ambassador Gholamali Khoshroo accused the United States of “bullying” and “abusing” its power to summon a meeting of the Security Council on a matter he said was “outside the scope of its mandate.”

Reports in Western media about antigovernment demonstrations in Iran have decreased since Tehran blocked key social-media sites used by the protesters to spread video of the earlier unrest, which has been seen as the strongest challenge to the country’s Islamic leadership in almost a decade.

The Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), part of a global project collecting evidence of Internet censorship, said on January 5 that its data confirm the government has blocked Telegram, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger during the protests.

Antigovernment protesters in Tabriz late on January 5 purportedly chanted the name of Soltan, the 26-year-old philosophy student and protester who was gunned down during the bloody government crackdown on demonstrators during the 2009 mass rallies. They also said they missed Neda, a young female student who

was shot dead during those same rallies and became an icon for the Green Revolution.

Another video reportedly shows thousands of fans at a soccer game in Tabriz, the capital of West Azerbaijan Province, a predominately ethnic Azeri region, chanting anti-leadership slogans.

In Khomein, a video appears to show a large crowd coming out for the first time in the city on January 5 shouting, "God bless your soul, Reza Shah," a reference to the former shah of Iran who ruled until 1941.

Reza Shah was the founding king of the Pahlavi dynasty, who put Iran on the path to modernization. The monarchy was toppled in the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

The protests, which began over economic hardships suffered by Iran's youth and working class, have evolved into an uprising against the powers and privileges of what some critics call a remote elite, especially Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Iran's army chief has said that while local police forces had mostly quelled the unrest, army troops remain ready to intervene if needed.

Even before the UN debate, the protests had set off a diplomatic battle between the governments of Iran and the United States, with Tehran accusing Washington of stepping up "its acts of intervention in a grotesque way in Iran's internal affairs under the pretext of providing support for sporadic protests."

Trump has pledged to help Iranians "take back" their government and the White House weighed imposing sanctions on those involved in the crackdown against demonstrators.

Trump has issued Twitter statements several times in support of the protesters, including a tweet on January 3 that said he respected "the people of Iran as they try to take back their corrupt government."

"You will see great support from the United States at the appropriate time!" Trump wrote in the post.

With reporting by RFE/RL's Radio Farda, RFE/RL correspondent Golnaz Esfandiari, Reuters, AFP, AP, dpa, and Press TV

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