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Egypt: Army must end attacks on protesters amid renewed violence

Deadly clashes in Cairo between unknown assailants and protesters have prompted Amnesty International to renew its call on the Egyptian army to protect protesters amid increasing violence ahead of presidential elections.

On Wednesday morning, groups of armed individuals clashed with protesters who had been staging a sit-in since Friday evening near the Defence Ministry in Cairo.

The Egyptian army and security forces initially did little to stop the clashes, which happened in the neighbourhood of Abbaseya. The clashes only stopped at around one o'clock after army troops, including armoured vehicles, and heavily armed riot police arrived at the scene.

"The army's intervention has come hours too late," said Amnesty International's Philip Luther, Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"There appears to be no will within Egypt's ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to prevent these tragic events. After the weekend attack, the authorities should have been prepared for the violence."

The incident follows attacks on protesters near the Defence Ministry over the weekend which left one dead and over a hundred people injured. The protesters had been demonstrating in support of a politician barred from the presidential elections and calling for an end to military rule.

One protester told Amnesty International he saw men shooting at protesters with pistols and shotguns, as well as throwing Molotov cocktails and rocks. Protesters were reported to have fought back, also throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails. Scores of people have been injured.

Egyptian authorities say seven people were killed in the violence, with unofficial reports varying from 11 to 20. One doctor told Amnesty International he had seen six dead bodies.

Medical sources have told Amnesty International that some of those killed and injured had been shot with pistol ammunition and shotgun pellets. One person reportedly had his throat cut.

Further demonstrations are expected in Cairo this evening in support of the protesters and against military rule.

Amnesty International has also been told that during the clashes groups of armed men prevented protesters from seeking treatment at Ain Shams University Hospital (Demerdash Hospital).

One protester told the organization that it was only after the army moved in that ambulances were able to easily access the area.

It is still unclear who is responsible for attacking the protesters. Both under former President Mubarak and Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, protesters have often been assaulted by unidentified groups of people.

Often such groups have accompanied the army and security forces as they have dispersed demonstrations.

Presidential elections are due to be held on 23 and 24 May.