

Vienna Riots Leave 50 Hurt As Protests Rise

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Body

Clashes overnight between the police and demonstrators left more than 50 people injured in Vienna today after a coalition government including members of the anti-immigration Freedom Party was sworn in.

The turmoil, unusual in a habitually sedate city, reflected the intense feelings stirred by the arrival in power of the party that Jorg Haider has steered from a fringe group to a serious political force in the last 15 years.

More than 40 police officers, 11 demonstrators and several bystanders were injured, none of them seriously, and dozens of police vehicles were damaged, the police said. Ten people were arrested, but all of them were subsequently released.

The government, composed of the center-right People's Party and the Freedom Party, immediately set about trying to calm the international storm provoked by what is widely viewed as the unacceptable legitimization of Mr. Haider, a man who has praised aspects of Hitler's rule but more recently dismissed the Nazi regime as barbaric.

"I must defend myself against unacceptable comparisons," Wolfgang Schussel, the new chancellor and a member of the People's Party said. "There is no new Hitler on the rise in Austria."

His remark went to the heart of an international outcry over Mr. Haider that has seen Austria's 14 European Union partners downgrade diplomatic relations and the United States recall its ambassador "for consultations."

Mr. Schussel, who embraced a coalition with the Freedom Party after protracted talks with the Social Democrats broke down, acknowledged that in the short term Austria was certain to face difficulties, but said he hoped that "in the medium term it may be possible to achieve a significant normalization."

The European Union, whose 14 other members have moved with unusual rapidity and severity in their measures against Austria, has halted bilateral political contacts with Austria, downgraded relations with Austria's ambassadors, who will be received only at "technical level," and said it would not support Austrian candidates for positions at international organizations.

The Austrian president, Thomas Klestil, who swore in the government on Friday, appealed to the European Union to ease its measures against Austria. A statement from the presidency said that Mr. Klestil had contacted Antonio

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Guterres, the Portuguese prime minister and current president of the European Union, to request "an exception" allowing bilateral contacts.

But it is not clear how the European Union could retreat from the steps it has taken as long as the Freedom Party remains in government.

Opinion polls suggest that Mr. Haider's party, which now has up to 33 percent support, has benefited from a widespread feeling that the country is being unfairly punished.

In an interview with an Austrian news agency, Mr. Haider, 50, adopted the confident and unguarded tone that has appealed to many Austrians, tired of three decades of government by a Social Democratic Party that followed an old practice of dividing up spoils among party faithful.

"These European Union measures are nothing to get hysterical about," Mr. Haider said, adding that other European ministers would have to get used to talking to the government members from his party because decisions in the 15-member bloc are taken by unanimity.

The European Union has not made any move to prevent ministers of the new government from attending European Union meetings because it has no legal basis to do so, and Mr. Haider appeared to be suggesting that Austria could respond to the sanctions by blocking European Union decision-making.

But the People's Party quickly declared that no such action was contemplated.

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Graphic

Photo: Violence flared during demonstrations late on Friday in Vienna after the swearing-in of a new governing coalition. More than 40 police officers, 11 protesters and several bystanders were injured, none seriously. (Agence France-Presse)

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Vienna Riots Leave 50 Hurt As Protests Rise

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