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Gbagbo calls demos 'insurrection' as opposition vows more protests

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Ivory Coast President Laurent **Gbagbo** on Friday described as an "insurrection" anti-government protests that left at least 25 dead, as opposition parties vowed to press on with demonstrations.

"These deaths are all the more tragic because nothing can justify the demonstrations... except a deliberate attempt to carry insurrection to the heart of the republic and to prolong the people's suffering," **Gbagbo** said in a televised **speech**.

"In all evidence, the events of March 25 were nothing to do with a peaceful demonstration. In truth, they were a covert attempt to let the rebellion into Abidjan, and to undermine the foundations of the state," added the president.

Gbagbo's speech came a day after soldiers and police clashed with demonstrators in the economic capital Abidjan. Twenty-five people were killed, according to security forces, 30 according to the abortive march's organisers.

Gbagbo also appealed to the opposition to rejoin the government: "I want the government to get back to work. I call on the parties and movements that have suspended their ministers' participation in the government to return to their place."

But the country's opposition parties vowed earlier on Friday to press on with further demonstrations against **Gbagbo**.

"The political forces reaffirm that their call for a march remains the watchword until the freedom to demonstrate and express differences recognised in article 11 of the constitution is recognised," the statement said.

The opposition accuses **Gbagbo** of failing fully to implement the terms of a peace accord signed at Marcoussis in France in January 2003, notably by relinquishing some of his powers to a prime minister.

After Thursday's violence, the New Forces -- former rebels whose uprising unleashed the Ivorian civil war in September 2002 -- and opposition parties withdrew their participation in a unity government formed in the wake of the Marcoussis pact. The Ivory Coast Democratic Party (PDCI), long the sole ruling party in the west African country, had already pulled out.

The signatories to Friday's opposition statement also accused an international committee formed to monitor implementation of the accord of being an "accomplice" in allowing the previous day's violence.

They urged the army and police to respect "the republican spirit of the regular defence and security forces whose duty it is among others to protect the population."

On the ground, army spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Aka Ngoran said that security measures had been lifted on Friday, adding that there was no sign of any demonstrators gathering in the streets of Abidjan.

But two armoured cars remained stationed by the police and the gendarmerie on the two bridges linking southern Abidjan with the Plateau business and administrative district.

The motorway heading north to the administrative capital Yamoussoukro was under the watch of soldiers with assault rifles, who were manning several roadblocks and searching all passing vehicles.

In the shantytown of Bori Bana, next to the Plateau, security forces were still out in strength. This is a district home to immigrants who were caught up in the political and ethnic turmoil that has wracked the country since the late 1990s.

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An AFP photographer said the northern Anyama suburb was still completely cut off by a military blockade. Helicopters were circling over the area, where large numbers of troops had been brought in by truck, he said.

European Union leaders in Brussels said the EU "deeply regrets the upsurge of violence in Cote d'Ivoire", in a statement at the end of a two-day summit, using the French name for Ivory Coast.

Amnesty International expressed concern that **Gbagbo's** men had used excessive force on unarmed demonstrators in Abidjan, and called for the release of numerous protesters it said had been taken prisoner on Thursday.

"These people run the considerable risk of torture and unfair treatment," Amnesty said in a statement sent to AFP in French.

It also noted that four Ivorian journalists were briefly taken into custody during the unrest, and a fifth -- a photographer -- was attacked by security guards who destroyed his camera and equipment.

"The authorities also pressured journalists to keep them from covering the demonstration," the rights group said, describing "verbal threats against foreign journalists, notably those from the French television channel France 2".

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