

Sudan says political protests death toll rises, reaches 22

Bread price hike takes its toll on people and president

KHARTOUM: Anti-government protests that have rocked Sudan have left 22 people dead, authorities said yesterday, after three demonstrators died hours after thousands cheered for President Omar Al-Bashir at a rival rally in Khartoum. Wednesday's competing rallies in the capital followed weeks of angry street protests over a government decision to triple the price of bread at a time when the country faces an acute shortage of foreign currency and soaring inflation.

Hundreds of protesters who have repeatedly called on Bashir to step down marched in the capital's twin city of Omdurman chanting "Freedom, Peace, Justice" and "Revolution is the people's choice". But they were quickly confronted with tear gas fired by riot police. Videos posted on social media that could not be independently verified showed some demonstrators pelting police officers with rocks.

Yesterday, police confirmed that three protesters had died in the Omdurman demonstration but did not specify the cause of death. "An illegal gathering was held in Omdurman and police dispersed it with tear gas," police spokesman Hashim Abdelrahim said in a statement. "Police later received reports that three protesters had died and several (were) injured. We are now investigating."

That raised the total death toll in protests so

far to 22 including two security personnel, according to official figures. New York-based Human Rights Watch said on Monday that at least 40 people had been killed including children, citing Sudanese activists and medical workers. A doctor had told AFP late on Wednesday that six protesters were being treated at Omdurman's main hospital for gunshot wounds. A group of doctors at the hospital said that police fired tear gas at the facility. "There was also shooting inside the hospital," the group said in a statement, without specifying who had opened fire.

Defiant Bashir

Bashir and others have blamed violence at the nearly month-long protests on "thugs" and "conspirators" without naming them. Wednesday's demonstration came soon after thousands of people danced and cheered Bashir at a separate rally held in the capital's Green Yard as police officers, soldiers and security agents secured the site. "This gathering sends a message to those who think that Sudan will become like other countries that have been destroyed," Bashir told the crowd. "We will stop anyone who destroys our properties."

Crowds chanted "Allahu akbar" (God is greatest) and "Yes, yes, Bashir, we will follow you" at the rally, where the president was accompanied



KHARTOUM: Sudan's President Omar Al-Bashir appears during a rally with his supporters in the Green Square in the capital. — AFP

by his wife and a group of ministers. "Those who tried to destroy Sudan... put conditions on us to solve our problems, I tell them that our dignity is

more than the price of dollars," Bashir said in an apparent dig at Washington, which had imposed a trade embargo on Khartoum in 1997. — AFP

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