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Dozens Killed as Police Storms Kiev's Maidan Square

By The Moscow Times

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At least 25 people have been killed in clashes between police and anti-government protesters in Ukraine.
Mstyslav Chernov

Ukraine's government forces blocked off Kiev from outside traffic as the worst violence in post-Soviet history gripped the Ukrainian capital, leaving at least 25 people dead and hundreds of others injured.

Clashes between police and anti-government protestors broke out Tuesday after opposition leaders accused pro-government factions of delaying constitutional reform that would limit presidential powers.

Law enforcement agencies gave demonstrators a deadline of 6 p.m. to end the street disturbances, after which police — armed with stun grenades and water cannons — began to advance on Kiev's Independence Square, the center of the opposition protests.

A statement released by the Ukrainian Health Ministry on Wednesday morning said that 25 people had so far been killed in the clashes, including a journalist. The Interior Ministry said that nine police officers had been killed, while a further 349 officers had been hospitalized.

Opposition leaders Vitali Klitschko and Arseny Yatsenyuk met with Yanukovych on Tuesday night to urge the president to pull back riot police from the streets, but said that the negotiations yielded no results.

"Yanukovych is reacting to the situation in an absolutely irrational way: All he was talking about was that the opposition leaders must appeal to people on Maidan to end the confrontation," Klitschko said in comments published on his political party's website on Wednesday morning.

Yatsenyuk said in an interview with Ukraine's Channel Five that the opposition had "only one [demand] — an immediate ceasefire and the pulling out of troops, to save people's lives," but that the president responded with a counter-offer to force the opposition "to essentially surrender and leave," Interfax reported.

As the chaos of gunfire, flames, stun grenades and water cannons engulfed Kiev, shock waves spread to opposition-minded western parts of Ukraine, where protesters stormed an Interior Ministry building in the Ternopil region on Tuesday, the ministry said in a website statement.

Interior Ministry troops in Ternopil refused to fight protesters, putting down their weapons and declaring that the "police is with the people," Ukraine's Espresso online TV reported.

The violence in Kiev marks the deadliest outbreak of violence since President Viktor Yanukovych decided to pull out of a planned association deal with the European Union in November in favor of closer ties with Russia.

The latest clashes came as Russia gave Ukraine $2 billion from an aid package, which it had been holding back to demand decisive action from the Ukrainian government to subdue the protests.

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