

Top Yemeni general calls for ouster of president

By Andre Damon
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Five high-level generals in Yemen, including Ali Mohsen, one of the country's top military figures, announced their support for the country's opposition movement Monday, calling for the ouster of president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The announcement came after plainclothes government snipers killed at least 52 unarmed protesters on Friday in Sanaa, the capital, and Saleh declared a 30-day state of emergency that broadly expanded the government's power.

The massacre drew public outrage both in Yemen and around the world, prompting a flood of resignations by government figures, including the country's ambassador to the United Nations, the head of the state news agency, the minister of human rights, and the ambassador to Lebanon. The state news agency announced Sunday that Saleh had fired his entire cabinet in response.

Major General Ali Mohsen, a powerful figure in Yemen and commander of the country's northwest military forces, publicly threw his support behind the opposition movement Monday, telling Aljazeera, "I declare on their behalf our peaceful support for the youth revolution and that we are going to fulfill our complete duty in keeping the security and stability in the capital."

Mohsen, who a 2005 US diplomatic cable called "Saleh's iron fist," is said by the cable to control over 50 percent of the Yemeni military's "resources and assets."

The general moved tanks under his control into the city to "support" the demonstrators, and his troops screened protesters entering and exiting the square. Both Western news sources and Aljazeera reported that the protesters were on good terms with Maj. Gen. Ali Mohsen's soldiers, with Aljazeera showing footage of

protesters handing flowers to soldiers and posing with them in photographs.

Friday's massacre did not stop the immense demonstrations in the country's capital, and over the weekend it became clear that the tide of popular opinion was shifting against the regime. Thousands attended a funeral over the weekend for those killed in the demonstration.

The Yemeni government, meanwhile, has stuck to its absurd story that the massacre was conducted not by the government, but by residents of the neighborhood in which the demonstrations were taking place. Even the United States government, the close ally of Saleh, refused to accept the story, in its statement on the events backhandedly attributing responsibility for the massacre to Saleh.

It is as yet unclear how much of the military leadership has joined the opposition. Yemeni Defense Minister Mohammad Nasser Ali said on television Monday that most officers still supported the regime. "The armed forces will stay faithful to the oath they gave before God, the nation and political leadership under the brother president Ali Abdullah Saleh," he said.

The US White House made public gestures to distance itself from Friday's massacre, while shoring up its support for the Saleh regime. Barrack Obama called Friday on Saleh to "adhere to his public pledge to allow demonstrations to take place peacefully."

John Brennan, the Obama administration's head counterterrorism adviser, called the Yemeni president Sunday, urging him to "support the right of the people of Yemen to engage in peaceful assembly," according to an official who spoke to the New York Times.

These statements were rendered hypocritical by the United States' subsequent actions in Libya, where it

participated in a hellish offensive against the country's military on the pretext of "protecting civilians." Yet when the White House's ally massacred dozens of unarmed civilians, it offered nothing but a terse four-sentence reproach.

In fact, Saleh and Ali Mohsen have both long been accomplices of the US military's crimes. In December of last year, WikiLeaks published documents showing that Saleh's regime gave the United States an "open door" to carry out missile attacks in the country. Saleh told US General David Petraeus that the regime would take responsibility for US airstrikes, saying, "We'll continue saying the bombs are ours, not yours."

Moreover, the Yemeni regime served as a willing accomplice in the US government's "extraordinary rendition" program, opening the country to serve as a site for the CIA's torture chambers.

The US diplomatic cables published last year by WikiLeaks paint Ali Mohsen as a key dictatorial ally of Saleh. A cable sent in 2005 by the US ambassador to Yemen, titled, "Will Saleh's Successor Please Stand up?" notes that Ali Mohsen is "generally perceived to be the second most powerful man in Yemen."

"Ali Mohsen's name is mentioned in hushed tones among most Yemenis, and he rarely appears in public," the cable continues.

The action by Gen. Ali Mohsen is not a conscientious turn to the side of the democratic and egalitarian aspirations driving the workers and students into the streets. Rather, it is an attempt by part of the Yemeni dictatorship to defuse popular opposition with a change of figurehead.

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