

Letter from Egypt 1

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Dear Friends, my thoughts and update on the unrest in Egypt

Since several of you have asked, I thought I would share some of my thoughts on the current situation in Egypt. It is very serious and has been simmering for a long time. Some facts and why the world is watching closely. First, the median age of Egypt is 24. Second, Egypt controls the Suez Canal which is a channel for the transport of 10% of the world's oil. The city of Suez where much of the violence has taken place is right on the canal. Third, the protesters have no religious agenda. Egyptians, Muslim and Christian, are together in this crisis. But the crisis is real, spreading, and will likely get worse before it is over.

For me these days are bittersweet. 'Bitter' because people are killed and many are wounded in the clash between the protesters and the government forces up to this moment. Who are these forces? They are two: the 'police' and the military. The 'control' or riot police are employees of the government and can be brutal. They carry weapons and manage the jails and the prisoners and the treatment of the prisoners. They are the forces that arrest persons deemed to be political liabilities and often torture them. This force is the one that you saw on the news trying to control the thousands of protesters but to no avail. Many of them lost their weapons to the protesters as they were on duty for 3 days and nights consecutively until they suddenly disappeared on Friday leaving the cities without the normal security. Some say they felt deserted by Mubarek so they just left their patrols, opened some of the jails and let the prisoners go. Some of those prisoners are literally 'criminals' and are now on the streets. In the first few days the police stations were set on fire and destroyed as were several other government buildings.

The other government force is the military which is made up of loyal officers and of 'drafted' young men who are serving 2 years of mandatory service. It is the largest military force in the Middle East after Israel and the most highly trained. Today, Sunday, the military are out in force guarding strategic locations like the Egyptian Museum, the 'Ring Road' which surrounds Cairo, and other places considered of importance by the government. The officers are professional and take their orders from the President, Mubarek. It is still unclear where their real loyalty lies if they are put into a position to choose between the protesters and Mubarek. The officers may give orders to shoot civilians, but the 'conscripts' may simply refuse to follow those orders. All of these men are Egyptians, but the conscripts are friends and/or members of the extended families of the protesters. Will they side with the protesters or will they stay loyal to the regime? Let's hope they will not have to choose.

Before the demonstrations began last Tuesday security throughout Egypt was tight. When I would take groups on study tours there we HAD to have armed guards accompany us everywhere. The police were everywhere - every corner, every street, every mosque, every church. Now they are gone. Consequently, large areas are without protection except those places where the military are visible and patrolling. One such place is the Dominican Priory in Cairo. I spoke with Fr. Jean Druel this morning and he said there are 5 military tanks

surrounding their property to protect it. Their employees are having a difficult time getting to work so they are not coming until this is all over. The Fathers are staying inside the priory and thank you for your prayers. The priory is surrounded by a high wall and rod iron gates even without the tanks. They are all fine.

Without the protection of the police which the people are accustomed to, neighborhoods are vulnerable. Looters are taking advantage of the situation by trying to ransack anyplace of value. To prevent that the men in neighborhoods are forming groups of their own using clubs, swords, and whatever to protect their properties. It is against the law for anyone except the military to have a gun. (The guns you see held by civilians are most likely stolen). These civilian protectors will know who does not belong in their neighborhood and such intruders will be told to leave. I have two friends of mine, Aziz and Sami (names have been changed to protect their identity), who are protesters by day and members of the neighborhood watch groups by night. Sami told me this morning (Sunday) that a young man very near him in the protests was shot by the police and killed. Sami is careful but feels it is his duty to speak out. He is also a very meek and mild young man who doesn't see much of a future for himself without a change in government. He is literally protesting for his future. Pray that he remains unharmed.

The situation is 'sweet' because maybe the protests will continue long enough and bring down Mubarek and his government before too many more people are killed or injured. The anger has been among the people, especially among the young people, for many years. The young are very educated, but have no jobs and a lot of time on their hands. Their future is bleak. To earn any decent amount of money to build a future they have to move to oil producing neighboring countries like Kuwait and the Gulf States to find work. And even there they are taken advantage of. Many of the young people I know in Egypt have told me often that 'their country' has many many resources, but those resources are squandered by the government and through the widespread corruption the money is taken abroad until the ministers can flee or retire and live in comfort while the Egyptian people live in squalor. One young man told me his country has done nothing for him. We Dominicans have done more and he is grateful.

Are the protests violent? At first they were not but the longer this goes on, it will spread and become increasingly violent. And I do not see it ending until Mubarek actually leaves. Tomorrow will tell us whether or not it will. The police are supposed to return to the streets. Will there be a clash between them and the military? Will the protesters become the direct targets of the numerous guns? But the unrest will most likely continue until Mubarek leaves Egypt. Where will he go? Not to any country where the women must wear the hijab because his wife is very liberal and has never worn anything religious. She has worked for women's rights in Egypt assertively and consistently for years. That rules out Saudi Arabia where the Tunisian President went.

Is the unrest all over Cairo? No, at least not in the numbers that we see in the media. The best way I can describe what is happening is to ask you to reflect back to the 60s and the protests against the Vietnam War. The protests then took place in many, many places but were contained. The same is in Cairo. They started in the downtown area and are still confined to that area but not for long. I can tell this because I can see the buildings and the bridges in the media's pictures. That is my stamping ground when I am there. I lived 5

minutes from the main square. I recognize the areas. They are the places of my second 'home', the ministry. The U.S. Embassy is in the same neighborhood. By the way, all but essential personnel are being sent out of Egypt as of today.

Are my Egyptian friends safe? So far, yes. Thanks be to God. Please pray for them and all the people.

I will try and write more as time passes and as I learn more. I am hoping to return to Egypt in May with a group of adults for a study seminar in Egypt which I will be leading. If things don't settle down soon, that trip may be cancelled by the university. Even if it is, I still may return for a few weeks. It is part of my ministry to 'Build a Bridge of Peace and Understanding' between our two countries. I will keep you updated.

Blessings and give gratitude for our freedoms,

Mary Ann Pevas O.P.