Panic, prayers as shooter starts firing at Trump rally

AFP- A string of pops sent a crowd of thousands of Donald Trump supporters diving for cover as the Secret Service rushed to protect the man they had waited hours in the sun to see.

A lectern emblazoned with the former president's name was knocked sideways, and the crowd gasped as agents lifted the 78-year-old Republican back to his feet after storming the stage.

Applause and cheering spread through the rural Pennsylvania fairground as Trump, clearly dazed, pumped his fist and waved through the linked arms of his security detail at the stunned crowd.

Officers gestured to his waiting motorcade, while an agent wearing a ballistic helmet and clutching a rifle scoured the crowd at Trump's feet.

The crowd chanted "USA, USA," as an unsteady Trump was led down the handful of steps from the stage to his waiting armored SUV.

"They won't take you down," shouted a man in the crowd as Trump's guardsmen formed a human chain to deliver him to safety, his fist still raised even as he was eased into the vehicle.

Erin Autenreith said she was "sitting in the first row in the middle. I was right in front of Trump."

"I was so excited. I just looked at him. Then I heard these pops. It sounded like a July 4 thing, pop, pop, pop," said the 66-year-old from Glenshaw, Pennsylvania.

"But when they all jumped on the stage, they surrounded him

and put him down. That’s when we realized it must have been really a shot.

“Then more people came and they cleared the area,” added Autenreith, who was attending her sixth Trump rally and had been volunteering at the gathering all day.

“Then they were talking to each other. ‘Left clear. Right clear.’ Then they got him up. And he said, “I gotta get my shoes on.'”

She said those words — which were caught by Trump’s microphone and audible in footage of the incident — were the first he spoke.

“And I saw on his cheek, on the right side, because he came up straight, I saw a little bit of blood,” Autenreith said.

“He turned and I could see it from the ear. And then he put his arm up with a fist pump,” she added.

Trump said in a Truth Social post later that he was “shot with a bullet that pierced the upper part of my right ear.”

— ‘Let’s go people’ —

As the enormity of what had happened sunk in, tempers rose in the crowd. Some Trump supporters hurled abuse at the media, conspicuous in the middle of the fairground.

“This is what you wanted, isn’t it,” said one man who declined to give his name.

Dozens of people made vulgar gestures towards the corner of the fairground from where the gunshots appeared to have come from. The shooter was “outside the grounds,” Butler County district attorney Richard Goldinger said.

“Let’s go people. Let’s go,” screamed one Secret Service officer as officials sought to evacuate the thousands of

rally-goers.

“This is an active crime scene,” said another, as a police helicopter flew overhead and a large police truck marked “Explosives” maneuvered through the mass of people.

Others berated organizers for the apparent lapse in security.

“Nice way to organize a perimeter,” shouted one woman as she left.

Another woman who had seen the chaos unfold on the stage was sobbing uncontrollably, asking about Trump’s wellbeing.

A group knelt and prayed near the back of the field.

“When they got him up, I got the impression they wanted to hustle him off the stage and he wanted to stay there and raise his fist to the world,” said sales worker Blake Marnell, 59, who had been in the front row.

Marnell, who attends Trump rallies in a signature brick wall suit in reference to the Republican’s border policies, said: “I never thought I would see this happen.”

When he turned back to the podium, he said, Trump was “covered” by the Secret Service. “I could not see him … but I could tell they were over him.

“I did see blood above his right ear. It’s unclear – I can’t say where that came from.”

“It’s an incredibly sad day,” added a visibly emotional Marnell, who is from San Diego, California.

“Just say a word for him to whoever you think is appropriate.”

AFP