Georgia arrests 107 more people as pro-EU protests continue

AFP- Georgia on Saturday said 107 people were arrested during a second day of protests sparked by the government's decision to delay European Union membership talks amid a post-election crisis.

The Black Sea nation has been rocked by turmoil since the ruling Georgian Dream party claimed victory in a October 26 parliamentary election that the pro-EU opposition said was fraudulent.

The interior ministry said 107 people were detained for "disobedience to lawful police orders and petty hooliganism."

"Throughout the night… protesters threw various objects, including stones, pyrotechnics, glass bottles, and metal items, at law enforcement officers," it said, adding that "10 employees of the ministry of internal affairs were injured."

The ministry had said that 32 police officers were wounded and 43 protestors detained on Thursday.

Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's statement Thursday that Georgia will not seek to open accession talks with the European Union until 2028 ignited a furious reaction from the opposition and two days of protests.

He later accused the opposition and the EU ambassador to Georgia of distorting his words, and insisted membership in the bloc "by 2030" remains his "top priority."

— 'Resistance movement' —

On Friday, AFP reporters saw riot police fire water cannon and

tear gas at pro-EU protesters gathered outside the parliament in Tbilisi, who tossed eggs and fireworks.

Clashes broke out later between protesters and police, who moved in to clear the area outside parliament, beating demonstrators, some of whom threw objects.

Independent TV station Pirveli said one of its journalists was hospitalised with serious injuries.

Protests were also held in other cities across Georgia on Friday, independent TV station Mtavari reported.

Pro-Western opposition parties are boycotting the new parliament, while President Salome Zurabishvili has sought to annul the election results through the country's constitutional court.

In a televised address to the nation on Friday evening, the pro-Western president – at loggerheads with the ruling party – said: "The resistance movement has begun… I stand in solidarity with it."

"We will remain united until Georgia achieves its goals: to return to its European path, secure new elections."

– 'Brutal repression' –

After the October vote, a group of Georgia's leading election monitors said they had evidence of a complex scheme of large-scale electoral fraud.

Brussels has demanded an investigation into what it said were "serious (electoral) irregularities" reported by election monitors.

Georgian Dream MPs voted unanimously Thursday for Kobakhidze to continue as prime minister, even as the opposition boycotted parliament, which faces a serious legitimacy crisis.

“Police actions in Tbilisi mark another punitive attack on the right to peaceful assembly,” said Amnesty International.

France, Britain, Ukraine, Poland, Sweden and Lithuania were among the countries to voice concern.

The Council of Europe condemned what it described as “brutal repression”, urging Georgia to remain “faithful to European values”.

In recent years, critics accuse Georgian Dream – in power for more than a decade – of having moved the country away from Europe and closer to Russia.

AFP