Soldiers vs office chairs: South Korea’s martial law standoff

AFP- Parliamentary staffers used sofas and fire extinguishers to block soldiers armed with assault rifles and night-vision goggles from entering South Korea’s National Assembly to maintain martial law, CCTV footage released Wednesday showed.

Shortly after President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law late Tuesday – the first time it had been imposed in the South in over four decades – helicopters ferried the heavily-armed troops into the compound of South Korea’s parliament, the footage showed.

Other soldiers climbed over perimeter fences after midnight, Kim Min-ki, secretary general of the assembly, told reporters at a briefing, adding that they then smashed windows to enter the building in what he called an “unconstitutional and illegal” invasion.

“We will identify the physical damages and losses caused by the declaration of martial law and hold those responsible accountable through legal action,” he said.

About 280 soldiers entered the parliament building, he said, but quickly encountered resistance from staffers, who grabbed anything on hand to barricade entrance ways and prevent the troops from reaching lawmakers in the debating chamber.

Footage showed dozens of soldiers attempting to enter the building, only to be pulled away by protesters.

“We are currently assessing the injuries sustained by several individuals, including parliamentary staff, during clashes with the martial law troops,” Kim said.

The soldiers “illegally sealed off the National Assembly after declaring martial law, violating the Constitution and the law by barring lawmakers from entering,” he said.

“They also trampled on the parliament building using military force, inflicting deep wounds on the hearts of the people,” he added.

— Struggle over a gun —

In one dramatic scene, An Gwi-ryeong, a spokeswoman for the opposition Democratic Party, scuffled with a soldier, attempting to seize his rifle.

The struggle lasted more than 10 seconds. After she released the weapon, the soldier briefly pointed it at her.

Undeterred, An, a former news anchor, shouted: “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?” footage of the incident showed.

“I had no choice but to stop them from entering the main building because a resolution was being submitted to block the martial law,” An told AFP Wednesday.

Under South Korea’s constitution, if parliament requests martial law be lifted, the president is obliged to comply, and experts have speculated the soldiers were sent in a bid to stop the vote from taking place.

“I did fear for my life,” she said of the confrontation.

“But I felt I had to stop them no matter what… because I could not comprehend the presence of fully armed soldiers inside the parliament.”

While the soldiers in the compound attempted to breach the building, police were sealing off the assembly gates, attempting to bar MPs from entering.

“Some MPs had to climb over the fence to get inside to vote on

the resolution," opposition MP Shin Chang-sik told AFP.

Not all MPs managed to enter the assembly. Lee Jun-seok, another opposition lawmaker, was stopped by rows of police guarding the gates.

"You are now obstructing the official duties of a lawmaker," Lee can be heard shouting in the footage – but he was still not allowed in.

– 'Go home, you bastards!' –

Once soldiers had made it into parliament, they found the doorways to the main chamber barricaded with piles of furniture erected by parliamentary staff, CCTV footage showed.

The video shows soldiers rushing towards the barricaded gate with guns pointed at the unarmed staffers, who continued to pile office chairs and desks in their path.

"Go home, you bastards!" shouted one staff member, as another protester unleashed a fire extinguisher in the direction of the soldiers,.

Behind the throngs of staff were scores of flashing cameras, capturing the surreal moment.

It was not until after the resolution calling for the withdrawal of martial law passed at around 1 am (1600 GMT) that the soldiers began to retreat.

They completed their withdrawal by 2 am, leaving behind shattered windows and broken furniture, but without a single shot fired.

"I was so incensed I couldn't sleep a wink last night, I came out to make sure we push out Yoon once and for all," 50-year-old Kim Min-ho told AFP at a protest at the assembly Wednesday.

“How can something like this happen in the 21st century?” Park Su-hyung, 39, said.

“I’m here out of fear our democracy will be trampled if we keep Yoon in office a moment longer”