

Serbia enters new year with student protests over train station tragedy

AFP – Thousands of students marched in Belgrade and two other Serbian cities during a New Year's Eve protest that went into Wednesday, demanding accountability over the fatal collapse of a train station roof in November.

The accident in the city of Novi Sad occurred on November 1 at a newly renovated train facility, killing 14 people – aged six to 74 – at the scene, while a 15th victim died in hospital weeks later.

Public outrage over the tragedy has sparked nationwide protests, with many blaming the deaths on corruption and inadequate oversight of construction projects.

In Belgrade, university students held a protest march through the capital city's centre late Tuesday, where local authorities had organised New Year's Eve celebrations with music and performance programmes.

"There is nothing to celebrate," the students said in a message sent before the protest started.

Alongside the Belgrade march, students in Nis, a university centre in the south of the Balkan country, also held a march to disrupt concerts, while Novi Sad – which did not have New Year's Eve celebrations – had a student demonstration.

In Belgrade and Nis, students stood in silence for 15 minutes at midnight to honour the 15 victims, bowing their heads solemnly as fireworks could be seen going off to ring in the new year.

In Novi Sad, students placed black ribbons on its City Hall.

Residents gathered at the central city square at the invitation of students, with some carrying banners that read "For the New Year, I wish for justice".

Before midnight, which they welcomed in silence and holding up the lights of mobile phones, the students recited poems and sang songs.

The protests come on the heels of 13 people being charged in connection with the tragedy, including former transport minister Goran Vesic, who resigned days after the incident.

The Serbian government has seen eight weeks of nationwide demonstrations following the deaths, with many protesters accusing the authorities of corruption and inadequate oversight.

Faced with public pressure, the government made all documentation related to the controversial reconstruction of the train station public, followed by the Prosecutor's Office doing the same.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic reiterated earlier Tuesday that "all student demands had been met" and claimed this is now "a matter of politics".

In a bid to abate public anger, the authorities over past weeks have promised various subsidies for young people.

Students, however, continued to protest, and almost all faculties at state universities across the country remain blockaded.

They say that responsibility has not been adequately assumed, and their anger has been further fuelled by government representatives accusing them of "protesting for money" and "serving foreign intelligence."

Tensions remained high during the New Year's protests, which continued after midnight in Belgrade.

“The students have risen,” they chanted, carrying banners that read “This is our country too” and “stop lying”.

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