

Serbians Strike In Protest Over Fatal Roof Collapse

AFP- Thousands of young people took to streets across Serbia on Friday, after student protest organisers called for a general strike over the fatal collapse of a train station roof in November.

Friday's strike call was the latest move to increase pressure on the government, following demands for high-ranking officials to resign and greater transparency into the accident investigation.

Public outrage has fuelled almost daily protests across Serbia after 15 people died, including several children, at the station in the northern city of Novi Sad.

The deaths came shortly after the completion of a three-year renovation project, and many attribute the accident to corruption and poor oversight of construction projects.

Thousands of young people, including many high school students, filled streets across the capital and urged the public to join Friday's one-day general strike.

Teachers also joined the walkout, shutting schools throughout the Balkan country, as did lawyers. Several theatres and cinemas closed.

Exact numbers for the number of participants was not immediately available.

"I have come here today, just as I have for the past two months, to support the students in this great fight for a free country, for justice, for accountability, and for expertise," said Nikola Nikacevic, a 48-year-old professor in Belgrade.

Demonstrations were also held in Novi Sad, Nis, and Jagodina,

the latter hosting a rival pro-government rally on Friday evening.

President Aleksandar Vucic, of the ruling SNS party, addressed several thousand people who rallied in the central town.

“Serbia is being attacked from both within and outside” the country, Vucic told the crowd from an improvised stage at the town’s central square.

The participants of the rally occasionally chanted Vucic’s name and “We don’t give Serbia away” while many waved Serbian flags.

Vucic and the government, which are facing mounting pressure, regularly accuse demonstrators of being backed by foreign powers.

They also say they have already met all the students’ demands by releasing documents on the station renovation project.

On Friday, Vucic invited students to dialogue.

“Despite everything, despite all insults, harsh words, I invite them (students) to dialogue to tell us what it is that has not been fulfilled.

“Tell us publicly which particular demand has not been fulfilled,” he said.

Students insist that the president is not the one who can address their demands arguing he has no jurisdiction over them.

Earlier Friday, video posted online also showed a car ramming demonstrators at a rally in Belgrade, injuring at least one person, according to local media.

Student protesters called for a one-day general strike Andrej ISAKOVIC

The interior minister later said that the driver had been arrested immediately after the incident.

Despite calls for strikes, public transport in Belgrade operated normally, as did the supply of electricity and gas.

The strike coincided with protests held every Friday, when demonstrators block roads across Serbia at 11:52 am local time (10:52 GMT) – the exact time the roof collapsed in Novi Sad – and hold 15 minutes of silence.

More than a dozen people have been charged in connection with the accident, including former transport minister Goran Vesic, who resigned days after it occurred.

According to Javni kupovi, an association that documents all demonstrations, more than 50 rallies have taken place in Serbia since November 1.