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Egypt Army Commits to Power Transfer, Israel Peace

Egypt military vows to hand over power to elected civilians, to stick to Israel peace deal

The Associated Press

By **BEN HUBBARD** and **MAGGIE MICHAEL** Associated Press

CAIRO February 12, 2011 (AP)

The ruling military pledged Saturday to eventually hand power to an elected civilian government and reassured allies that Egypt will abide by its peace treaty with Israel after the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak, as it outlined the first cautious steps in a promised transition to greater democracy.

The military's statement Saturday had been eagerly awaited by the public and thousands of protesters still massed in Cairo's central Tahrir Square. The crowds were still riding high on jubilation over the success in removing Mubarak on Friday after 18 days of unprecedented popular protests, but they promised to maintain pressure on the military to carry through long-sought reforms.

After the statement, the main opposition coalition — a loosely based grouping of youth and traditional opposition groups — said it would end its main protest in Cairo's Tahrir, or Liberation, Square but would call for weekly demonstrations after Friday prayers.

The group also listed its demands for the first time during a press conference. Those included: the lifting of hated emergency laws, the forming of a presidential council and broad-based unity government, the dissolution of parliament and creation of a committee to amend or rewrite the constitution. They called for reforms ensuring freedom of the press, freedom to form political parties and more transparent media institutions.

The coalition also called for an investigation into allegations of endemic corruption within the regime and the trial of officials responsible for the deaths of protesters.

Some protesters not linked to the coalition said they would stay camped on Tahrir Square, and it was not immediately clear when the downtown area would be cleared.

Appearing on state TV, a military spokesman said the Armed Forces Supreme Council asked the current government appointed by Mubarak in his final weeks to continue operating until a new one is formed. The step appeared to be a stopgap measure to keep the state and economy functioning while a transitional administration is set up.

Protesters have called for dramatic steps to ensure Egypt moves to a real democracy after nearly 30 years of autocratic rule under Mubarak and his ruling party. Protest organizers have called for the dissolving of parliament — which is almost entirely made up of ruling party lawmakers — the forming of a new, broad-based transitional government and creation of a committee to either amend the constitution or totally rewrite it.

The Armed Forces Supreme Council, a body of the topmost generals that now rules Egypt, has not said whether it will carry out any of those steps. But Saturday's statement also did not rule it out.

In the square, some protesters welcomed the cautious first measures, despite distrust of the government put together by Mubarak as a gesture early in the wave of protests.

"It was a good thing," said Muhammed Ibrahim, a 21-year-old from the Nile Delta town of Banha who joined the crowds in Tahrir. "We don't want there to be a political void."

The spokesman, Gen. Mohsen el-Fangari, appeared on state TV in front of a row of Egyptian military and national flags and read the council statement, proclaiming respect for the rule of law — perhaps a sign that the military aims to avoid imposing martial law.

The military is "looking forward to a peaceful transition, for a free democratic system, to permit an elected civil authority to be in charge of the country, to build a democratic free nation," he said.

The military underlined Egypt's "commitment to all its international treaties."

Israel has been deeply concerned that Egypt's turmoil could threaten the 1979 peace accord signed between the two countries. The United States, Egypt's top ally, is also eager to ensure the accord remains in place. The military strongly supports the accord, not in small part because it guarantees U.S. aid for the armed forces, currently running at \$1.3 billion a year.

Anti-Israeli feeling is strong in Egypt, and many of the hundreds of thousands of protesters expressed anger at Mubarak's close cooperation with Israel on a range of issues. Still, few seriously call for the abrogation of the treaty, realizing the international impact.

The emphasis in the military statement was on keeping the state and economy functioning after the turmoil of the past three weeks, which were a heavy blow to Egypt's economy. For days, many businesses and shops were closed, much of Cairo's population of 18 million stayed home

under heavy curfew, and foreign tourists — one of the top sources of revenues — fled the country. This week, even as businesses began to reopen on a wide scale, labor strikes erupted around the country, many at state industries or branches of the bureaucracy.

The military relaxed the curfew — now to run from midnight to 6 a.m. instead of 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. — and the Stock Market announced plans to reopen on Wednesday.

The Supreme Council asked the public, particularly the millions in the government sector, to "work to push the economy forward," el-Fangari said, an apparent call for everyone to return to work.

The military also called on the "current government and provincial governors to continue their activities until a new government is formed," el-Fangari said. The statement did not address when a new government would be formed.