

Erdogan Rejects Criticism of Turkey Protests

From VOA Learning English, this is In the News.

Turkey's Prime Minister has rejected criticism of police violence against protesters. Recep Tayyip Erdogan was reacting to comments from a European Union official. The EU Enlargement Commissioner, Stefan Fuele, had earlier urged Turkey to investigate the violence and punish those responsible. The Turkish leader said on Friday that police in Europe would use even greater force against protesters.

The two men spoke at a conference in Istanbul. Turkey is seeking membership in the EU.

On Thursday, Prime Minister Erdogan had demanded an immediate end to nationwide protests against his government. He spoke at Istanbul's airport to thousands of supporters. The crowd shouted "We will crush them" and "God is Great" as they waited for him to return from a week-long visit to North African nations.

Speaking to the crowd, the prime minister said the anti-government protests border on illegality.

His comments were far different from an apology earlier in the week from Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc. He said it was wrong to use "excessive force" against people seeking to protect the environment.

The demonstrations began at the end of May after the government announced plans to redevelop Gezi park in Istanbul. Protesters say the park is one of the few open and natural spaces in a city of almost 14 million people.

The early protests were called to protect trees from being destroyed. The demonstrations spread across the country as people reacted to the police violence.

One incident repeatedly shown on television news and social media shows a policeman firing tear gas at a woman in a red dress. Some demonstrators now carry pictures of the incident that say, "The more you tear gas us, the bigger we get."

Protesters also condemned actions aimed at enforcing Islamic rules. One recent law, for example, added restrictions on alcohol use. Protesters see the restrictions as evidence of the government enforcing Islamic values in a democratic and non-religious state.

As many as 1,700 protesters were arrested in about 60 cities during the past week. In Izmir, police raided the homes of Twitter and Facebook users. The charges against those arrested said they had incited crime.

A young demonstrator expressed fears that fighting between government supporters and protesters would divide the Turkish people.

“I think unfortunately we will start fighting with our people, the other side. The other side, their side. But I don't think there's something like the other side. But he's supporting the other side.”

The proposed development of Gezi park is part of a larger building project in Istanbul. It includes plans to build a new mosque, a shopping center and a performing arts center. The

proposal calls for destroying the historic Ataturk Cultural Center. The center is named for Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who established the modern Republic of Turkey. Last week, a local court ordered a temporary stop to work on the project.

Turkish media has criticized itself for failing to report on the events of the past week. One television network, NTV, apologized after some reporters resigned in protest at the lack of reporting on the early protests.

That's In The News. I'm Katherine Cole.