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Why the Egyptian Army Won't Shoot Protesters

Posted By Mohammed Omer

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CAIRO – Khalid Ibrahim Al-Laisi has been a soldier in the Egyptian army for 20 years. Today, far from shooting protesters, he says the time has come "to revolt against oppression."

And as protesters vow to continue to press for President Hosni Mubarak to leave now, rather than at election time later in the year as he offered to do Tuesday, Al-Laisi, 38, is the face of an army that is one with protesters, not against them.

Khalid tells IPS just why. "My monthly wage is 1,100 Egyptian pounds (188 dollars). It's not enough, and I have to do another job in the evenings." He and his wife struggle to bring up their three children, aged 13, nine and four in the Al-Zaytoun neighborhood of Cairo.

"No one can afford to live on these wages," he says. "There is no joy in life. You bring a child into this world to enjoy life, not to feel trapped. One kilo of meat costs 60 Egyptian pounds (EGP) in today's market. To eat meat once a week costs me 300 (Egyptian) pounds a month. That leaves no money to go out and do anything else."

Al-Laisi was promoted recently, and that added 100 EGP to his salary. That went partly to pay for extra tutoring for his son Mohammed. The tutoring costs 300 EGP a month.

The demonstrations have been effective, he says. "The bullet that does not hit, at least makes some noise," he says, repeating a popular saying in the army. "Nothing comes overnight. But I am going to ask for my needs, because my life, like the life of so many others, has simply become intolerable."

The army man's suffering is one with that of the people determined to continue the struggle to get Mubarak out. Mubarak's declaration that he would leave was a triumph for the demonstrators, but not what many seemed prepared to be satisfied with, although crowds seemed divided on this.

"We still insist he should leave now," political activist Buthaina Kamel said at Cairo's Tahrir Square after Mubarak's television address Tuesday. Many demonstrators see their success as a revolution, and don't want to give up.

Mustapha Al-Iraqi, a young oil engineer said he will not leave the square, and expects more protestors through the week. "President Mubarak is fooling around with our demands," he said.

A high-ranking Egyptian official confirmed that the Egyptian Army will not shoot at protesting people. The officers are expressing the sentiment of the soldiers, says Al-Laisi. "Who are we going to shoot? Our brothers and sisters?"

Groups of demonstrators were planning meanwhile to take their protests closer to Mubarak's presidential palace. Units of the Egyptian Army are surrounding the palace, which has been fortified with barbed wires and checkpoints.

It is still unclear how far the army will let protests go, and at what point at least some units of the army may step in against the demonstrations if the protesters go that far.

Army units deployed so far have been popular among the people, and particularly the demonstrators. "The army and the people are one – hand in hand", a group chanted. There has been an outpouring of expressions of support for the army.

The regime clearly wants to defuse the situation for now. Yasmine Al-Jayyoshi, among the organizers of the demonstration, said she feared the regime would punish demonstrators. That was only another reason to stay on and protest, she said.

Al-Laisi said the violence was regrettable, and "private and public properties must be protected." But, he said, "if the demonstrations are too peaceful, officials do not understand the urgency among the people."

The protests are undoubtedly people driven, and not organized by parties. Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic party whose members won a fifth of seats in the last parliament despite reports of widespread rigging by the ruling party, seems to hold little sway over the thrust of the demonstrations.

The protests seem driven by wages and prices, and less by politics and ideology.

