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Violence mars IMF meeting

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By Phil Thornton

Riot police fired tear gas canisters and water cannon at rock-throwing protesters today, as a march organised to protest against the IMF's annual meetings in Turkey turned into a violent confrontation.

Several hundred demonstrators clashed with police in the streets surrounding Taksim Square, just 200 metres from the Istanbul Congress Centre where the IMF meetings are being held.

As rioters clashed with police wearing body armour in the centre of the Turkish capital, shoppers ran for cover and businesses shuttered up their businesses to escape the rocks and tear gas.

Phalanxes of policemen wearing gas masks and helmets and carrying riot shields and batons charged at groups of protesters. Officers fired tear gas at the retreating groups while armoured vehicles sprayed the demonstrators with water cannon.

The demonstrators, many were wearing red scarves to obscure their identity and protect against the gas, responded with a battery of stones and missiles. People pulled up the small paving stones that are common on Istanbul's streets to use as fresh ammunition.

Rocks smashed shop windows and dented parked cars while several volleys of stones bounced off the police officers' shields. Protestors destroyed two cash machines just off Taksim Square and set fire to the contents of a large paper recycling container. Branches of foreign-owned banks such as HSBC were sprayed with red graffiti paint.

Protesters carried placards emblazoned with the words "IMF out" and chanting "IMF get out of our city". Many were carrying red flags of Socialist Platform for the Oppressed, a Turkish campaign group.

Several pedestrians caught up in the skirmishes could be seen rubbing their eyes after being affected by the clouds of tear gas hanging in the air. Police helicopters hovered above the crowds.

Cafe owners offered people lemon juice, which is effective in reducing the symptoms for those affected by tear gas. Two people were arrested by police and taken away in handcuffs.

Turkish police had erected security barriers along the streets surrounding the Congress Centre several days before the meetings began, making it clear that the security forces had anticipated the possibility of violent protests.

A coalition of protest groups has called for two days of protests against the IMF under the title "We're shutting the IMF & World Bank meeting down!"

Turkey has been badly affected by the global financial crisis and economic recession. Its economy is expected to contract by 6.5% this year while the unemployment rate hit 15.5%, an all-time record and one of the highest rates for any G20 country.

Turkey and the IMF are negotiating a potential new loan agreement after the last one expired more than a year ago. IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn said at the weekend that talks would resume when the meetings end on Wednesday.

There is significant opposition among Turkish students to the IMF, which helped bail Turkey out of a deep financial crisis in 2001. Last week a student hurled a shoe at Strauss-Kahn as during a question and answer session at Bilgi University in Istanbul.

Taksim Square was the centre of a major protest in 1977 by Socialist, Communist and Maoist groups organised by the Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions in Turkey. An estimated 500,000 people clashed with security forces on 1 May, which is Labour Day.

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