**Iran warns against 'illegal gatherings' after protests**

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The Iranian government warned people against further protests on Saturday after two days of demonstrations sparked by anger over an array of economic problems.

"We urge all those who receive these calls to protest not to participate in these illegal gatherings as they will create problems for themselves and other citizens," said Interior Minister Abdolrahman Rahmani Fazli.

State news channel IRINN said it had been banned from covering the protests that spread from second city Mashhad on Thursday to hit several towns and cities.

The protests initially targeted economic problems, but quickly turned against the Islamic regime as a whole.

US President Donald Trump warned "the world is watching" after dozens of demonstrators were arrested.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi dismissed Trump's comments as "irrelevant" and “opportunistic".

Media coverage inside Iran focused almost exclusively on pro-regime rallies held on Saturday to mark the defeat of the last major protest movement in 2009, which hardliners call "the sedition”.

The timing was coincidental, since the rallies are held every year on this day, but offered a handy show of strength to the regime as huge crowds of black-clad supporters gathered across the country.

"The enemy wants once again to create a new plot and use social media and economic issues to foment a new sedition," Ayatollah Mohsen Araki told a crowd in Tehran, according to the conservative Fars news agency.

Video footage on social media showed hundreds marching through the holy city of Qom on Friday evening, with people chanting "Death to the dictator" and "Free political prisoners”.

There were even chants in favour of the monarchy toppled by the Islamic revolution of 1979, while others criticised the regime for supporting the Palestinians and other regional movements rather than focusing on problems at home.

Footage showed thousands gathered in the cities of Rasht, Hamedan, Kermanshah, Qazvin and elsewhere, with police responding with water cannons.

Officials were quick to blame outside forces for the unrest.

"Although people have a right to protest, protesters must know how they are being directed," Massoumeh Ebtekar, vice president in charge of women's affairs, wrote on Twitter.

She posted images from Twitter accounts based in the United States and Saudi Arabia, voicing support for the Mashhad protests.

* 'Serious challenges' -

Nonetheless, officials warned against dismissing the public anger seen in recent days.

"The country is facing serious challenges with unemployment, high prices, corruption, lack of water, social gap, unbalanced distribution of budget," wrote Hesamoddin Ashena, cultural adviser to President Hassan Rouhani, on Twitter.

"People have the right for their voice to be heard.”

There has been particular anger at welfare cuts and fuel price increases in the latest budget announced earlier this month.

Since the 2009 protests were ruthlessly put down by the Revolutionary Guards, many middle-class Iranians have abandoned hope of pressing for change from the streets.

But low-level strikes and demonstrations have continued, often on a sector-by-sector basis as bus drivers or teachers or workers from specific factories protest against unpaid wages or poor conditions.

Some of this week's protests were directed against financial scandals linked to unauthorised lending institutions which collapsed with the loss of hundreds of thousands of accounts.

Payam Parhiz, editor-in-chief of reformist media network Nazar that broke the news of the Mashhad protests, said they were more focused on the economy than those in 2009, which were sparked by allegations of election-rigging.

"Then, they were middle-class and their slogans went beyond economic matters to things like cultural liberties," he told AFP.

"Today, the concerns are economic. There are people who have lost their life savings. They will protest until their problems are resolved.”

Since taking power in 2013, Rouhani has sought to clean up the banking sector and kickstart the economy, but many say progress has been too slow.

Aware that economic problems can quickly spiral into political chaos, officials from across the political spectrum have called for greater efforts to tackle poverty and the 12 percent unemployment rate.

"Solving people's economic problems is the chief priority in the country," tweeted Ebrahim Raisi, the hardline cleric defeated by Rouhani in May's presidential election.