Sudan's military acknowledge 'outrageous' violations as mass rape and killings alleged

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After the toppling of their strongman dictator Omar al-Bashir, Sudanese civilians have pressed the ruling military to hand over power to civilian hands — a tussle that has erupted in violence across the North African state.

Now, Sudan's rulers have acknowledged that their staff committed "violations" while dispersing protesters engaged in a non-violent sit-in demonstration outside military headquarters in Khartoum.

Ruling military council spokesman, General Shams Eddin Kabashi, told reporters at a news conference on Thursday that an investigation was underway and that several military officers were already in custody for alleged "deviation" from the military's orders.

"We feel sorry for what happened," he said.

"We will show no leniency and we will hold accountable anyone, regardless of their rank, if proven to have committed violations."

He did not elaborate on the violations beyond describing them as "painful and outrageous".

Mass rape and extra-judicial killings alleged

Protesters allege that over 100 people were killed in the capital and across Sudan in a sweeping crackdown last week.

They also said more than 40 bodies were pulled from the Nile River in Khartoum and taken away by security forces.

In response, Amnesty International called for an international probe.

Sarah Jackson, Amnesty's deputy regional director for East Africa, the Horn and the Great Lakes, said it was "more urgent than ever" for Sudan's rulers to allow the United Nations and African Union to investigate the protesters' claims.

She also alleged that Sudan's authorities were ruling amid "escalating human rights violations under their watch".

The dispersal of the sit-in was a violent turn in the standoff between the protesters and the military, which removed President Omar al-Bashir from power in April after a months-long popular uprising against his 30-year rule.

Mr al-Bashir, who has since been placed under arrest in an undisclosed location, is wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide in Darfur — western region of Sudan.

Mr Kabashi admitted that the members of the transitional military council had convened the night before the sit-in was dispersed and agreed to drive protesters away.

Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change (FDFC), a coalition of political groups representing the protesters, also insisted on an international investigation — a demand Mr Kabashi strongly rejected.

On Thursday, UN special representative of the secretary-general on sexual violence in conflict, Pramila Patten, expressed "grave concern" over reports of mass rapes of protesters and female medical personnel by security forces and militias.

Human Rights Watch urged the Sudanese military to restore access to the internet, which has been blocked since the start of the clampdown.

Mr Kabashi ruled that out, alleging the use of social media has posed a threat to national security.

Sudanese protesters have relied heavily on social media to post video depicting violence perpetrated by security forces, mobilise rallies and coordinate dissent.

Separately, Mr Kabashi dismissed the death toll announced by the Sudanese Doctors Central Committee, a group associated with the protesters, as misleading.

The group has said 108 people were killed and more than 500 wounded during the unrest.

The military-controlled health ministry later put the death toll at 61.

Ethiopia steps in to mediate the dispute

Following last week's violence, Ethiopia stepped up its diplomatic efforts to mediate the crisis.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed visited Khartoum and held several rounds of separate talks with the generals and pro-democracy forces to appoint a special envoy.

Mr Kabashi said Ethiopian mediators did not put forward any proposal that could ease disagreements but have only sought to encourage both parties to resume direct talks.

In the wake of the military crackdown, talks between the military and protesters were suspended and the FDFC held a three-day general strike and a campaign of civil disobedience.

Leaders of the protest movement said earlier they would not sit down with the generals until they acknowledged last week's "massacre," allowed the formation of an international commission to investigate the killings of protesters, restored internet services, adhered to previous deals struck before the breakdown in talks and send paramilitary troops back to their barracks.

While admitting the military's responsibility for the killings, Mr Kabashi insisted the question of deploying troops is a military affair that no-one should tamper with.