**2 killed amid massive anti-government marches in Venezuela**

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Two people were shot dead as opponents of President Nicolas Maduro flooded the streets of Caracas and other Venezuelan cities Wednesday, battling security forces in what's been dubbed the "mother of all marches" against the embattled socialist leader.

Tens of thousands of protesters made an unsuccessful attempt to march to downtown Caracas as security forces fired tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowd. Dozens even had to slide down a concrete embankment and into the Guaire River to escape the noxious fumes.

Carlos Romero, just three days away from his 18th birthday, was walking to play soccer with friends when he bumped into pro-government militias stalking a pocket of protesters, family spokesman Melvin Sojo told The Associated Press, based on the accounts of two people who rushed Romero to the hospital after he was hit by gunfire.

"This was supposed to be a happy moment but instead I came home to see my brother die," said Sojo, who grew up in the Romero home and returned Tuesday from Ecuador, where he had been living the past year.

There was no immediate confirmation that the militias shot the boy, and some government officials cast doubt on the account, saying Romero was killed during an attempted assault.

In the western city of San Cristobal, a 23-year-old woman identified as Paola Ramirez was shot dead by similar groups, according to Mayor Patricia Gutierrez, who said the groups circled demonstrators on motorcycles as they were heading home from the demonstration.

The two killings bring to seven the death toll since protests began three weeks ago over the Supreme Court's decision to strip the opposition-controlled congress of its last remaining powers, a move that was later reversed but not before enraging the opposition and causing a storm of international criticism. The charges that Venezuela is moving toward a full-blown dictatorship come against the backdrop of an ever-deepening economic crisis.

As night fell, a few thousand people were still gathered in a plaza in wealthy eastern Caracas as residents in nearby buildings banged pots and pans in a show of support. A group of youths with their faces covered tore down street signs and billboards for makeshift barricades. They then launched rocks and Molotov cocktails against lines of police and national guardsmen who responded with tear gas in cat-and-mouse skirmishes likely to last deep into the night.

The Supreme Court's decision energized Venezuela's fractious opposition, which had been struggling to channel growing disgust with Maduro over widespread food shortages, triple-digit inflation and rampant crime. They've called for another day of protests Thursday.

"We'll see each other tomorrow at the same place and same time because our fight for democracy doesn't end," former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, who the government last week barred from running for public office, said at an evening press conference to announce the opposition's next steps.

Opponents are now pushing for Maduro's removal through early elections and the release of scores of political prisoners. The government last year abruptly postponed regional elections the opposition was heavily favored to win and cut off a petition drive to force a referendum seeking Maduro's removal before elections late next year.

Maduro, addressing supporters at a larger countermarch, seemed open to some sort of electoral showdown. He said he was "anxious" to see elections take place sometime "soon" and repeated his call for dialogue, saying he had a proposal he wanted to make the opposition.

"Today they attempted to take power by force and we defeated them again," said Maduro.

Opposition marchers included Liliana Machuca, who earns about $20 a month holding two jobs teaching literature. Although she doesn't expect change overnight, she said protesting is the only option the opposition has after what she says are scores of abuses committed by the government.

"This is like a chess game and each side is moving whatever pieces they can," said Machuca, her face covered in a white, sticky substance to protect herself from the noxious effects of tear gas. "We'll see who tires out first.”

A short block away, a sea of red-shirted government supporters marched by calmly, some dancing to a salsa band that tried to provide an air of normalcy to the otherwise tense political standoff that has paralyzed Venezuela the past few weeks.

Many were state workers like Leidy Marquez, who was bused in from Tachira state, on the other side of the country, along with co-workers at state-run oil giant PDVSA.

"The opposition is trying to provoke a conflict but they aren't going to achieve their goal," said Marquez, wearing a shirt emblazoned with the eyes of the late Hugo Chavez, a symbol of revolutionary zeal in Venezuela.

The government has responded to the near-daily protests with its own show of force: jailing hundreds of demonstrators, barring Capriles from running for office and standing by as pro-government groups violently attack opposition members of congress.

The president also signed orders on TV late Tuesday activating the "green phase" of enigmatic military plans to defend Venezuela against what he describes as U.S.-backed attempts to sow chaos and overthrow him. He also said authorities in recent hours had rounded up unnamed members of an underground cell of conspirators at Caracas hotels, including some who were allegedly planning to stir up violence at the march.

Maduro didn't provide evidence to back his claim that a coup attempt was underway, and the opposition rejected his comments as a desperate attempt to intimidate Venezuelans from exercising their constitutional right to protest.

"We're convinced the country knows who the true coup mongers are and it's against them we will march," the opposition said in a Tuesday late-night statement.

Foreign governments are also warning about the increasingly bellicose rhetoric and repressive stance of the government.

Maduro this week said he was dramatically expanding civilian militias created by Chavez and giving each member a gun. There's also criticism that the government isn't doing enough to restrain the collectives — motorcycle-driving militants — that have operated like shock troops firing on protesters as security forces stand by.

"We're a peaceful people, but we're also armed," Energy Minister Luis Motta Dominguez told state workers gathering for Wednesday's rally.

The U.S. State Department said those who commit human rights abuses and undermine Venezuela's democratic institutions would be held accountable.

"We are concerned that the government of Maduro is violating its own constitution and is not allowing the opposition to have their voices heard, nor allowing them to organize in ways that expresses the views of the Venezuelan people," Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told reporters Wednesday.