

Lawmakers attacked as protesters storm Macedonian Parliament

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Skopje (Macedonia): Chaos swept into Macedonia's parliament Thursday as demonstrators stormed the building and attacked lawmakers to protest the election of a new speaker despite a months-old deadlock in efforts to form a new government.

Police block protestors from entering into the Parliament building in Skopje

Clashes over several hours injured 77 people, including 22 police officers and several lawmakers, authorities said. Neighboring countries along with the European Union and United States expressed concern at the small Balkan nation's escalating political crisis.

Dozens of protesters, some of them masked, broke through a police cordon after the opposition Social Democrats and parties representing Macedonia's ethnic Albanian minority voted to name a new parliament speaker.

Many of the protesters were supporters of former prime minister Nikola Gruevski, whose conservative party won elections in December but didn't get enough votes to form a government on its own. He has been struggling to put together a coalition government and his supporters have been holding nightly street rallies for two months across the country to protest the political situation.

Shouting, hurling chairs and grabbing camera tripods abandoned by startled journalists, the protesters attacked lawmakers, including opposition leader Zoran Zaev, who was seen bleeding from the forehead. TV footage showed a bloodied Zaev and other Social Democrat lawmakers surrounded by protesters waving national flags, shouting "traitors" and refusing to allow them to leave.

A tense standoff lasted several hours, and hundreds of protesters swarmed through the parliament building. Police said 30 lawmakers and a number of journalists who had been trapped inside were eventually evacuated safely.

After being initially overwhelmed, police fired flash grenades and clashed with protesters, expelling them from the building.

Lawmaker Ziadin Sela, who heads a small ethnic Albanian party, was the most seriously injured, police said.

Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov went on television to appeal for calm and "for reasonable and responsible behavior." Speaking in a brief address to the nation, Ivanov said he had summoned the leaders of the country's main political parties for a meeting Friday.

The U.S. Embassy in Macedonia and senior European Union officials condemned the violence, while neighboring Greece warned that Macedonia might be "sliding into deep political crisis."

Zaev, 42, was later cheered by hundreds of supporters when he appeared with several lawmakers from his party outside the Social Democratic headquarters in the capital of Skopje.

In a statement, the party accused rival conservatives of inciting the violence and stirring "hatred and division" among the Macedonian people.

Macedonia has been without a government since the elections. Coalition talks broke down over ethnic Albanian demands that Albanian be recognized as an official second language. One-fourth of Macedonia's population is ethnic Albanian.

Amid the coalition negotiations, the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia, as the Balkan nation's parliament is known, has been deadlocked for three weeks over electing a new speaker.

Zaev suggested early in the day that a speaker could be elected outside normal procedures, an idea immediately rejected by the prime minister's party as an attempted coup. Zaev went ahead with the vote, and a majority in parliament elected Talat Xhaferi, a former defense minister and member of the ethnic Albanian Democratic Union for Integration. Protesters exploded in anger and fought their way into the building.

Despite the return of calm, a small group of demonstrators ignored instructions by police to leave the area early Friday and they set up tents in a small park near parliament.

- AP