

Richard Balmforth

Ukraine opposition rallies against Yanukovich



Ukrainian police prevented thousands of opposition supporters from marching to the presidential administration building on Wednesday in a protest against the trial of former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

The march, on the 20th anniversary of Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union, climaxed weeks of tension over the trial which has polarised public opinion in the ex-Soviet republic and drawn criticism from the United States and the European Union.

Tymoshenko, a charismatic 50-year-old politician, is on trial on charges of abuse of office while prime minister.

But supporters say she is the victim of a vendetta by President Viktor Yanukovich, her arch-foe, who only narrowly beat her in a presidential election in February 2010.

Tension ran high on Wednesday after the court trying Tymoshenko refused to give her two days parole to leave prison detention to see her mother during the Independence Day holiday.

Led by Tymoshenko aide Olexander Turchinov, a crowd of several thousand surged out of a central Kiev park to march to the presidential HQ, waving flags and chanting "Down with the gang," a reference to Yanukovich and his team.

But after about 100 metres (yards) they were blocked by police. After sweeping through a first police line, they were halted by hundreds of black-helmeted riot police. After a tense hour in which protesters tried in vain to negotiate their way through, they gradually dispersed.

A witness said at one point police used a gas spray but otherwise there was no police action to break up the protest and there were no arrests.

INDEPENDENCE SQUARE CALL

March organisers called on supporters to protest later on Kiev's main Independence Square -- centre of Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" streets protests in 2004 which thwarted Yanukovich's first bid for the presidency.

But those who answered the call were drowned out by a concert and other official events organised to mark the 20th anniversary of independence.

All the same, the high turn-out, not only from Tymoshenko's "Batkivshchyna" party but also from thousands from other opposition groups, indicated emotions were still running high over the Tymoshenko trial.

Tymoshenko is specifically accused of exceeding her powers and coercing the state gas company Naftogas into signing a gas deal with Russia's Gazprom in 2009 which saddled Ukraine with too high a price for its strategic gas supplies.

Several EU countries as well as the United States have condemned the trial and the police detention of Tymoshenko as politically-motivated. She spent the eve of Independence Day in a Kiev prison.

Her detention was ordered by the judge on August 5 because of her alleged disruptive behaviour in court.

Many analysts regard the trial as a PR disaster for Yanukovich who says he is trying to take his country into the European mainstream and hopes to finalise a free trade zone agreement with the bloc by the end of the year.

(Writing by Richard Balmforth; Editing by Jon Hemming)