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Hundreds of American Students Lie Low in Egypt, as Protests Continue

By Ursula Lindsey and Aisha Labi

Cairo

Universities in Egypt were closed on Sunday and American institutions with students in the country were monitoring their safety while making arrangements to get them home, as antigovernment protests and sporadic outbreaks of violence continued in the capital and other cities. With airlines observing a 4 p.m.-to-8 a.m. curfew imposed by the Egyptian government, however, thousands of people trying to leave were stranded at the international airport here.

The U.S. State Department issued a [travel warning](#) on Sunday recommending that Americans not travel to Egypt, and advising those already in Egypt to remain indoors during the curfew hours, to avoid demonstrations, and to consider leaving as soon as they safely could. The U.S. government was arranging charter flights to help Americans leave.

Despite the pockets of violence that have flared in Cairo and other areas over the past week, however, university officials stressed that they were looking out for the safety of students on study trips to Egypt.

Morgan Roth, communications director for North America for the American University in Cairo, where about 500 U.S. students are attending programs, said she and her colleagues had spent the weekend reaching out to parents and to study-abroad advisers.

"We are making sure they're all informed and that everybody has the right information," Ms. Roth said on Sunday in New York.

"Parents are seeing a lot of terrible things on TV, and want assurance that we are able to provide for their children and are keeping them safe."

"This is evolving, literally, as we speak," she said.

The university's main campus is in a suburb of Cairo, away from the demonstrations downtown, and the university is moving all of its U.S. students, many of whom live off campus, to a dormitory there and to another location on the island of Zamalek, in Cairo.

Rehab Saad, the university's director of news and information in Cairo, said that the government's cancellation of Internet access was a challenge. "Once Internet is back up, we will be able to coordinate with our students better. It's very hard right now. It's very hard to communicate with each other."

Some Damage to the Campus

The university's historic downtown building, which hosts continuing-education programs, borders the capital's central Tahrir Square, which has been the gathering point for large demonstrations for the last six days, and shops along the surrounding streets show scars from street fighting between protesters and the police, as well as looting.

The campus itself has sustained some damage. The guard post in front of the university was set on fire, and the graffiti that has bloomed across the city covers one of its walls with slogans such as "Free Egypt," "Revolution," and, in reference to Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak, "Game Over, Mubarak."

The protesters are seeking to topple the government of President Mubarak, who has been in power for 30 years and whom they blame for the poverty and lack of freedoms that many Egyptians endure. Students and faculty members who observed and participated in the protests here, however, described the demonstrations with a sense of historic occasion, rather than of danger.

"This is a new generation," said Said Sadek, a professor of sociology at the American University in Cairo who attended the protests on Saturday. Young people make up 40 percent of the population, he said, but "the president is out of touch with them."

University students played a pivotal role in organizing the protests through Facebook and other online groups. "Facebook changed Egypt," said Omar Alaa el-Deen, who studies law at Pharos University in Alexandria and has been going regularly to the protests in Tahrir Square. "The revolution came from there. But we didn't expect this," he said, referring to the large gatherings of people from many social and age groups. The protest marches have drawn men and women, Christians and Muslims, and Egyptians

from the upper and lower classes. Whole families have participated, from grandmothers to toddlers.

In an effort to impede such organizing, Egyptian authorities took the unprecedented step of suspending Internet access across the country on Friday. But people showed up anyway, said Mr. el-Deen. "All the people are just going to Tahrir Square every day because everyone can go there and it's in the middle of the city. I think there will be another demonstration tomorrow and after tomorrow and after that, until the system is down."

Khaled Fahmy, chair of the history department at the American University in Cairo, was reached by phone on Saturday as he stood among a crowd of tens of thousands of people in Tahrir Square.

"The crowd is still large and in a sense we're in a festive mood," said Mr. Fahmy, who has been attending the protests since they started last Tuesday.

"It's a huge uprising with no leadership," he said. "I didn't know that these people existed. I didn't know when people took to the streets, it would be people like this. I thought Mubarak had killed this spirit among Egyptians. I have seen an extraordinary degree of solidarity, civility, and articulateness.

"We've always been given the impression by government media that if people take to the street, they will be Muslim Brotherhood," he said, referring to Egypt's banned Islamist opposition group.

Elsewhere in the capital, army tanks stood in the square in front of Cairo University, the nation's largest university, but the square was otherwise deserted. The army's presence is helping to maintain order, but the troops are not clashing with the protesters. Relations with the protesters are cordial so far: Tanks are covered with anti-Mubarak graffiti and people often approach soldiers to hand them snacks and warmly shake their hands.

Regular police officers, however, are largely absent. Some areas have experienced fires and looting, and there have been reports of prison breaks. But Egyptians have made valiant efforts to police and organize themselves. Across the country, men have formed neighborhood watches and set up roadblocks and patrols to protect their families and property.

Logistical Hurdles

In the United States, study-abroad officials acknowledged the challenge of evacuating students under the curfew restrictions.

Gary Rhodes, director of the Center for Global Education, an online clearinghouse for information about health and safety in education abroad that is based at the University of California at Los Angeles's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, said that the travel warning issued on Sunday is a step up from the previous travel alert and that institutions "are now moving to develop a plan for supporting student departure from Egypt."

"With the recent cancellations of a number of flights, and the challenges on the ground, that's not a simple proposition," he said. "What many are doing is to make sure students who are there are safe and to develop a plan for getting students out, along with institutional staff."

"The good news is that we haven't heard of any incidents negatively impacting the safety of students directly," he added.

Some institutions are getting support from emergency-assistance and insurance providers.

Officials with HTH Worldwide, an insurance company based in Radnor, Pa., that provides health-and-safety services overseas for colleges, said the company was working with a number of American institutions, including the University of Michigan and Amideast, a large provider of study-abroad programs. Its clients have a total of about 100 students in Egypt at the moment.

Carol Foley, an HTH official who works directly with colleges and universities, said the company was receiving constant updates about where the students are and how they are faring.

Amideast has about 20 students in Egypt, and all of them have relocated to an 18th-floor apartment in Cairo, Ms. Foley said. They are passing the time by taking cooking lessons with the mother of a local program assistant and trying to stay unruffled.

Direct communications were difficult for a time on Friday and Saturday, Ms. Foley said, but the group has a landline telephone, and the students are in touch regularly. "They all seemed calm and focused on the historical significance of the event," she said.

Several students from other programs were at the airport in Cairo, but their charter flight had not been able to depart yet.

Alex Puig, a regional security director with International SOS, another company that provides health and security services for study-abroad programs, said his office was working closely with a security team in London to monitor and handle the situation. Mr.

Puig declined to identify the company's university clients but said that they had up to 250 students in Egypt now.

"Some are together, others dispersed. Some are in a very good situation and are not anywhere near Cairo," he said. "There are others who are smack in the middle of Cairo. We're concerned not because they are in physical danger, but the mere fact that they are in Cairo has them and their parents and the institutions quite worried."

As the situation in Egypt has evolved, universities have weighed different factors, Mr. Puig said. Initially, the concern was whether students would lose academic credit if they left early, "but now they are starting to make the call to get people out."

The travel warning issued Sunday by the State Department is just "one element that affects that decision," he said. "Another element is the parents. A lot of pressure is brought on institutions to bring the students home."

"It is important to point out that these institutions are acting very responsibly," he added. "There has been very immediate attention to what is going on, and from the get-go, they have been on the phone to us, talking to us, wanting to know what our recommendations are, and getting constant updates."

His company is also organizing charter flights out of Cairo, he said, but he noted that the situation at the airport is "overwhelming and chaotic," and that even more people would be heading there after the State Department's new warning.

"It's already a bad situation," he said. "A lot of flights are being canceled because of the curfew, thousands of people are sleeping in the airport, and now a lot of people will be rushing to get onto flights on Monday. A bad situation may get a little worse."

Meanwhile, a group of American academics have endorsed the call for regime change in Egypt. More than 80 political scientists, historians, and others at dozens of universities have signed an [open letter](#) urging President Obama to seize the "chance to move beyond rhetoric to support the democratic movement sweeping over Egypt."



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