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# Liberia leader clamps down after violent protests

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(Recasts after president addresses nation)

By Alphonso Toweh

MONROVIA, April 25 (Reuters) - Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf tightened security in the capital Monrovia on Tuesday after former government soldiers paralysed the city with violent protests over unpaid severance packages.

United Nations peacekeepers had to shoot into the air and fire teargas to disperse the protesters, who set up burning barricades and threw rocks, causing shops and banks to close and civilians to desert the streets.

The unrest was one of the biggest challenges to Johnson-Sirleaf's authority since she took office as Africa's first elected female head of state in January.

"A group of men bearing rocks and broken bottles attacked officials, broke windows at the Ministry of Defence, hurt civilians ... we cannot allow it to happen," Johnson-Sirleaf said in an address on national radio.

"They caused pandemonium in downtown Monrovia and forced many business houses to close. Such reckless and criminal behaviour cannot and will not be allowed to exist," she said.

Johnson-Sirleaf banned a demonstration planned by civil servants for Wednesday to protest against reforms which could see some of them lose their jobs and instructed the authorities to arrest and prosecute the instigators of Tuesday's unrest.

She also ordered the arrest of anyone carrying a machete at night and temporarily banned the sale of fuel in bottles on street corners, which she said had worsened the violence.

Thousands of soldiers from the old Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), many of whom fought 14 years of on-off civil war against rebel fighters, are being demobilised to make way for a smaller new air force, navy and army in the West African country.

But not all those leaving the army have been given the severance benefits they were promised.

"We want the government to give us our money. Are we not Liberians? Don't we deserve this or what?" shouted Captain James Welleh, in jeans and a black T-shirt and brandishing a stick.

"The government owes us \$800 each. We fought for this country and we deserve our pay," he said as fellow former soldiers chanted "Enough is enough" outside the Defence Ministry in the centre of the city.

#### PAY SUSPENDED

Johnson-Sirleaf, known as the Iron Lady for her tough political style, said she had suspended outstanding payments to former AFL soldiers which should have been made on Friday until they showed a willingness to resolve their grievances peacefully.

Witnesses said the protesters had seized two Kalashnikovs from peacekeepers before the order was given to shoot in the air. U.N. armoured personnel carriers were positioned on streets around the Defence Ministry building.

The civil war in Africa's oldest republic ended in 2003, but various groups, including soldiers and their slain comrades' widows, protest that they have been neglected. Forming a new army is just part of a huge reconstruction task in the country.

Frustrations over delays in demobilisation have boiled over several times over the past year, with around 200 unarmed soldiers looting their own barracks and rampaging through the streets last June.

Many former rebels have handed in their weapons, and U.S. defence contractor DynCorp International, hired to train the new army, last year finished demobilising more than 8,000 irregular fighters employed by former President Charles Taylor.

But funding shortfalls have delayed the process for regular army soldiers.

The new army being set up after a 2003 ceasefire enforced by 15,000 U.N. troops will initially be made up of 2,000 soldiers but will eventually be twice that size.

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