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Riot police use colored water cannons Monday to push anti-government protesters out of downtown Budapest.

By Bela Szandelszky, AP

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Hungarian police fire rubber bullets at anti-government rioters in Budapest

Updated 10/23/2006 2:43 PM ET

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By Petr David Josek, AP

A protestor shouts anti-government slogans and waves flags as thousands gathered Monday in downtown Budapest, Hungary.

dismantle the dozens of tents set up by the protesters, and were expected to allow the demonstrators to return after Monday's events.

As the commemoration events began, state news wire MTI said police beat some of the protesters — including women and elderly people — with rubber batons, leaving some with head injuries.

By late afternoon, protesters began gathering in different spots near the center of the city. A few hundred protesters set up road blocks with garbage cans and threw rocks at the police dressed in riot gear, who used large amounts of tear gas and several water cannon — some spraying green and blue dye.

At the same time, Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union, the main center-right opposition group, was holding their own

BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) — Police fired tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons to disperse protesters Monday in anti-government demonstrations coinciding with Hungary's commemoration of the 50th anniversary of its uprising against Soviet rule.

At least 27 people, including some police, were injured, a rescue official said. An Associated Press photographer said one protester was hit in the head by a rubber bullet and bleeding.

A line of about 150 police, behind three water cannons, slowly advanced on a crowd of protesters. About 200 rioters, threw bottles and rocks at the police who fired tear gas back at them. A police helicopter circled low above the crowd.

A man apparently stole an unarmed tank that had been part of a nearby exhibit about the revolution and drove it among the protesters. Police rushed the tank — similar to those used by the Red Army to squash the 1956 uprising — pulling out at least one person.

Within the crowd, protesters could be seen carrying placards with 7-foot (2-meter) tall letters spelling out the word "freedom" in Hungarian.

Protests on Kossuth Square outside parliament started Sept. 17, when a recording was leaked revealing Socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany admitting that the government lied about the economy before its re-election in April.

The protesters had vowed to stay until Gyurcsany was dismissed, but police pushed them off the square after they refused to submit to security checks. But authorities did not

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1956 commemoration just a few blocks away. According to MTI, more than 100,000 people were at the rally.

Fidesz leader Viktor Orban, a former prime minister, said his party would propose holding a binding referendum on the package of reforms introduced by the government to lower what is the largest state budget deficit in the European Union.

"People should be given the opportunity to vote on what is being done against their will," Orban told a large crowd.

Late Monday, President Laszlo Solyom canceled his scheduled appearance at the unveiling of a major 1956 memorial near Heroes' Square, near the spot where an 18-meter-high (60-foot-high) statue of Stalin was toppled by the revolutionaries a half century ago.

"The president will not be attending for security reasons," spokesman Ferenc Weber said.

Gyurcsany would still attend the unveiling, spokeswoman Emese Danks said.

The commemorations began with a ceremonial raising of the national flag, followed by Hungarian and foreign dignitaries laying flowers at the foot of a 1956 monument on Kossuth Square.

Later, the officials attended a special session in the legislature's Upper House Chamber, where Gyurcsany and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso spoke.

The 1956 student protests began on the afternoon of Oct. 23, and by nightfall had turned into the armed uprising. Around 2,800 Hungarians and 700 Soviet troops were killed in the Red Army attack, which was launched Nov. 4, 1956.

After the military defeat, strikes and protests continued for several weeks until a Soviet crackdown definitively ended the uprising in January 1957.

Some 200,000 Hungarians fled the country and at least 225 Hungarians accused of participating in the revolution were executed — including Imre Nagy, the communist-turned-democrat who was briefly returned to power in 1956. The communists were in power in Hungary until 1989.

During Monday's protests, mounted police helped drive the rioters further back, toward a subway stop, where the main opposition group was holding its own commemoration and anti-government protest.

Many had questioned the right of Gyurcsany's Socialists — heirs of the communist party — to lead the official commemorations.

But Gyurcsany, 45, said his government had a legitimate claim to the principles of the revolution. He described Nagy as "the political predecessor of every prime minister" of post-communist Hungary.

Barroso said the 1956 revolution "lit a torch of freedom" which later helped topple dictatorships across Europe.

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