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We Are All Egyptians

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

CAIRO

Inside Tahrir Square on Thursday, I met a carpenter named Mahmood whose left arm was in a sling, whose leg was in a cast and whose head was being bandaged in a small field hospital set up by the democracy movement. This was the seventh time in 24 hours that he had needed medical treatment for injuries suffered at the hands of government-backed mobs. But as soon as Mahmood was bandaged, he tottered off once again to the front lines.

"I'll fight as long as I can," he told me. I was awestruck. That seemed to be an example of determination that could never be surpassed, but as I snapped Mahmood's picture I backed into Amr's wheelchair. It turned out that Amr had lost his legs many years ago in a train accident, but he rolled his wheelchair into Tahrir Square to show support for democracy, hurling rocks back at the mobs that President Hosni Mubarak apparently sent to besiege the square.

Amr (I'm not using some last names to reduce the risks to people I quote) was being treated for a wound from a flying rock. I asked him as politely as I could what a double-amputee in a wheelchair was doing in a pitched battle involving Molotov cocktails, clubs, machetes, bricks and straight razors.

"I still have my hands," he said firmly. "God willing, I will keep fighting."

That was Tahrir Square on Thursday: pure determination, astounding grit, and, at times, heartbreaking suffering.

Mr. Mubarak has disgraced the twilight of his presidency. His government appears to have unleashed a brutal crackdown — hunting down human rights activists, journalists and, of course, demonstrators themselves, all while trying to block citizens from Tahrir Square. As I arrived near the square in the morning, I encountered a line of Mr. Mubarak's goons carrying wooden clubs with nails embedded in them. That did not seem an opportune place to step out of a taxi, so I found a back way in.

So did many, many others. At Tahrir Square's field hospital (a mosque in normal times), 150 doctors have volunteered their services, despite the risk to themselves. Maged, a 64-year-old doctor who relies upon a cane to walk, told me that he hadn't been previously involved in the protests, but that when he heard about the government's assault on peaceful pro-democracy protesters, something snapped.

So early Thursday morning, he prepared a will and then drove 125 miles to Tahrir Square to volunteer to treat the injured. "I don't care if I don't go back," he told me. "I decided I had to be part of this."

"If I die," he added, "this is for my country."

In the center of Tahrir Square, also known as Liberation Square, I bumped into one of my heroes, Dr. Nawal El Saadawi, a leading Arab feminist who for decades has fought female genital mutilation. Dr. Saadawi, who turns 80 this year, is white-haired and frail and full of fiery passion.

"I feel I am born again," she said, adding that she intended to sleep with the protesters on Tahrir Square. She also suggested that instead of being sent into comfortable exile, Mr. Mubarak should be put on trial as a criminal; that's a theme I've heard increasingly often among pro-democracy activists.

There's a small jail in Tahrir Square for pro-Mubarak thugs who are captured, and their I.D. cards indicate that many are working for the police or the ruling party. Mr. Mubarak may claim that he's unhappy about the violence in Cairo, but he caused it — and the only way to restore order in Egypt and revive the economy is for him to step down immediately. I'm encouraged that the Obama administration is reportedly discussing with Egyptian officials ways to make that happen.

Countless Egyptians here tell me that they are willing to sacrifice their lives for democracy. They mean it. But I've heard similar talk in many other countries in the throes of democracy movements. Unfortunately, usually what determines the fate of such movements is not the courage of the democracy activists but the willingness of the government to massacre its citizens. In that case, the survivors usually retreat in sullen silence, and the movement is finished for a time.

Whatever Mr. Mubarak is planning, it does feel as if something has changed, as if the Egyptian people have awoken. When I needed to leave Tahrir Square today, several Egyptians guided me out for almost an hour through a special route so that I would not be arrested or assaulted — despite considerable risk to themselves. One of my guides was a young woman, Leila, who

told me: “We are all afraid, inside of us. But now we have broken that fear.”

The lion-hearted Egyptians I met on Tahrir Square are risking their lives to stand up for democracy and liberty, and they deserve our strongest support — and, frankly, they should inspire us as well. A quick lesson in colloquial Egyptian Arabic: *Innaharda, ehna kullina Misryeen!* Today, we are all Egyptians!

David Brooks is off today. His column will appear on Sunday.