

Indian police battle 'Cockroach' protesters

Security forces confront youth-led movement with tear gas and batons

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NEW DELHI

Police in New Delhi repeatedly fired tear gas and beat protesters yesterday, as Indian authorities tried to disperse thousands of supporters of the youth-led "Cockroach" movement who were protesting over the education system.

The demonstration, the biggest in the capital in years, threatened to spill over into a broader challenge to the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Security forces charged protesters after they breached barricades near parliament, where legislators were gathering for the start of a new session. Images on social media showed police beating demonstrators with sticks and batons as they chased them away.

"Students have been beaten," said opposition MP Dimple Yadav. "Today will be remembered as a black day for democracy and for our history."

Protesters had responded to a call by the upstart Cockroach Janta Party for a big demonstration, pouring into central Delhi on foot from early yesterday, carrying flags and placards demanding the government "wake up and listen".

Tension rose in the afternoon when

security forces used tear gas across routes to parliament to disperse demonstrators. Protesters responded by shouting slogans such as: "Whenever Modi is scared, he puts forward the cops."

"I am supporting our students because this government thinks it can get away with whatever it wants," said Mayank Suri, a garment retailer from Mathura who had travelled to participate. "We will keep protesting until this government takes action."

The CJP began as a satirical online campaign conceived by postgraduate student Abhijeet Dipke in the US after he heard a Supreme Court judge dismiss India's unemployed youth as "cockroaches". After Dipke returned to India,

it morphed into a national protest movement seeking reforms to India's education system to stop corruption and improve fairness and opportunity.

"When I was in the US, they told me this was just a social media trend and no one would come out on the streets," Dipke told a cheering crowd.

Authorities closed metro stations in the centre of the capital, shut down mobile internet and barricaded roads to parliament to try to stop protesters.

Inside parliament, Modi made an apparent reference to the protests, saying: "I believe that where there are facts, there is no need for chaos. If your logic and your facts are strong, there is no need to raise your voice."

The government later agreed to allow two representatives of the CJP to meet a minister to deliver their demands, which include the education minister's resignation and compensation for the families of students who killed themselves after the exams for which they had studied were cancelled following leaks of the question papers.

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party has won a string of regional election victories over the past two years, cementing a dominance of Indian politics not seen since Indira Gandhi's rule in the early 1980s.

But the controversy over the exam system has exposed a deep vein of popular discontent.