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## Tear gas, Molotov cocktails as Venezuela cracks down on demo

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Caracas (AFP) - Anti-government demonstrators clashed for almost two hours with riot police who finally subdued them after President Nicolas Maduro's security forces cracked down.

Venezuela has seen almost daily anti-government demonstrations over violent crime, shortages of essential goods such as toilet paper, and soaring inflation, in the most serious challenge yet for Maduro since he succeeded late socialist-populist Hugo Chavez last year.

At least 28 people have died and 400 have been injured in the student-led protests launched February 4 in San Cristobal, in the west of Venezuela, and later spread to Caracas and several other cities.

There have been 41 investigations opened against police for alleged human rights violations.

Just before he reiterated his will to meet with student demonstrators "with love," Maduro warned a protest stronghold: "I am going to give these 'Chuckies' who are taking over (the plaza) and blocking Francisco de Miranda Avenue two hours and if they are not out, I will be liberating these public spaces with public forces."

He calls the radical protestors "Chuckies," a reference to the murdering knife-wielding doll in the horror movie series.

In dramatic scenes on Saturday, the university students, many of them hooded, hurled rocks and Molotov cocktails, pulled up manhole covers, and piled up trash as makeshift barricades.

Police finally used tear gas and their riot vehicles to clear the usually busy areas, sending the demonstrators scurrying.

Earlier, hundreds of supporters of Maduro's leftist government staged a colorful rally in the Venezuelan capital.

"The people and the armed forces are on the streets defending the Bolivarian revolution and the legacy of Hugo Chavez, the country and our constitution," thundered National Assembly Speaker Diosdado Cabello, sporting a coat in Venezuela's national colors of yellow, blue and red.

Many of the pro-government supporters held up Venezuelan flags and wore red, the color closely associated with Chavez and his "Bolivarian revolution," while armed forces members joined in the rally.

The Popular Will, a prominent opposition party, called for a rival demonstration in another part of the capital, "to repudiate the brutal onslaught of state security and pro-government (vigilante) groups against demonstrators."

Maduro announced he would propose to the United States creating a high-level commission for bilateral talks -- after days of tenses than usual rhetoric between the longtime foes.

- US-Venezuela commission eyed -

Maduro said his proposed commission "for peace and mutual respect of sovereignty" between Venezuela and the United States could include parties from both sides and the UNASUR grouping of South American nations.

But just on Friday, Washington dismissed Maduro's "absurd" accusations that it was meddling in the country's internal affairs by intervening in anti-government protests.

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Elias Jaua had earlier called top US diplomat John Kerry a "murderer of the Venezuelan people," accusing him of encouraging the protests that have killed 28 people in five weeks.

The president said he would seek to name Cabello to lead potential talks with the United States "to speak while respecting peace for a dialogue among equals."

His terms for dialogue with the United States are virtually identical to those that have been stated repeatedly by Cuba, Caracas's closest ally.

The United States has not taken either country up on their regularly stated offers.