

'Lisbon quiet despite troop movements' from the Diário de Notícias (25 April 1974)

Caption: On 25 April 1974, reporting on the early stages of the military insurrection and the 'Carnation Revolution', the Portuguese daily newspaper Diário de Notícias assesses the situation in Lisbon.

Source: Diário de Notícias. 25.04.1974. Lisboa. "Calma aparente dos Lisboaetas apesar dos movimentos de tropas", p. 8.

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Lisbon quiet despite troop movements

It was business more or less as usual in Lisbon this morning, with people travelling to work by various forms of transport. Many did not seem to realise what was going on, though it may have been far quieter than usual because much of the population had heard about the coup on the national station Rádio Clube Português (RCP).

Between 8 and 9 a.m., the buses and trams were running normally (albeit with fewer passengers), at least in places where troops were not active. The trains were also running, and they, too, had fewer passengers. Many people had probably opted to stay at home when they heard what was happening from the radio.

Many others found out only when they were prevented from getting to work by cordons of soldiers blocking roads into the Baixa downtown district, around the RCP, the central Comércio Square, the airport and other places. Many people tried to find out what was happening by striking up conversations with the soldiers, who politely declined to give information, citing orders from above.

In some places, such as on the east of Comércio Square, small groups formed to chat with the soldiers and look at the armoured cars and personnel carriers parked there. A few shots were heard from the Cais do Sodré area at around 9.30, but the apparent calm around the central ferry terminal was barely disturbed.

Encarnação exit from Lisbon blocked

The situation had remained calm since dawn. Troops had taken up positions at the RCP (blocking access roads by positioning vehicles across the streets and manning the improvised barricades with troops), at the state radio station, where an anti-tank gun was deployed on the verandas, and at the airport, where access roads were also blocked.

At the Encarnação roundabout, next to the First Light Infantry Regiment barracks, forces apparently from this unit set up a roadblock and stopped vehicles heading out of Lisbon to the northbound motorway from 9 a.m. Traffic had been moving freely prior to this, however, as it had on the bridge over the Tagus and the motorway to Estoril.

Things were rather confused in the early hours, though, and it was often impossible to distinguish between rebel soldiers and troops defending government buildings. The barracks, meanwhile, kept their gates shut, though soldiers and vehicles were unusually active in some of them.

Apparently the troops occupying the national radio station were from the firing range at Carregueira, while those who surrounded general headquarters in the early morning were from the Fifth Riflemen. The Second Lancers and Seventh Cavalry Regiments were also seen on the move, the former in Monsanto on the outskirts of Lisbon, the latter towards Comércio Square.

Few police on the streets

Lisboners gradually began to realise what was happening. Groups of people formed to exchange information that they had heard on the radio or to talk about events they had witnessed in person.

One thing soon became very clear, however: there had probably never been so few police on the streets. The exception was the Traffic Division, and even they were seen only in essential places, mostly where the traffic had to be diverted.

The only area with an obvious police presence was at the crossroads of Avenida Fontes Pereira de Melo and Avenida António Augusto de Aguiar, where riot police barred the way to police headquarters.

Otherwise, things were more or less normal, though there were signs of people's unease about the course of events.

Rush to grocers and banks

Thousands of people certainly preferred not to go to work, but the most striking event of the morning was the rush to grocers, bakeries, supermarkets and elsewhere to buy food and other essentials.

Long queues of people anxious to stock up on food formed in many parts of the city, perhaps fearful that the situation would drag on and that the shops would shut.

When the banks opened in the morning, many customers tried to withdraw money, but orders were soon given to prevent this, and the banks closed.

Come what may, however, for many Lisboners the fear of direct conflict between the forces involved was outweighed by their desire to witness events on the ground as they developed.

Defence Ministry occupied but Parliament apparently normal

After 10 a.m., it transpired that the Defence Ministry at Cova da Moura had been occupied, and traffic had been unusually busy since dawn.

At the Portuguese Parliament in São Bento, meanwhile, there seemed to be no special security measures in place, and only the usual National Republican Guard (GNR) personnel could be seen manning their sentry boxes.

The situation was not much different at other GNR barracks throughout the city, which merely closed their gates and posted guards outside.

Early morning shots at TV station

As mentioned above, the occupation of various government buildings and radio stations began (and in many cases ended) at dawn, just before 3 a.m., apparently unopposed.

Some shots were fired at the State television station offices in Lumiar, however, at about 4 a.m. Four or five rounds of automatic gunfire were heard in the area, but their origin could not be determined. A voice was heard over a loudspeaker soon afterwards urging soldiers to remain calm, saying that there was no danger and, at the same time, drawing attention to the communiqués being broadcast by the RCP.

Most of the people living in the area did not hear the shots at the time, however, or the orders, and they only found out what was going on when they heard the morning's announcements. A few shots were also apparently heard at the airport in the early morning.

Prohibited areas

As the hours passed, the situation did not seem to change much, with troops holding the same positions. The only difference was that some of the prohibited areas had been extended.

Before daybreak, the roads going into the Baixa at Comércio Square had been blocked only very close to the area, but, at around 9 a.m., the prohibition extended to the whole of the downtown area, from Rossio Square. On the eastern side of Comércio Square, meanwhile, it was possible to approach the ferry terminals, but, on the opposite side, barriers were in place just after Avenida Infante D. Henrique.

At mid-morning, the forces occupying the RCP repeated calls for the public to get off the streets and return home.

The atmosphere, however, was far from tense. In most places where troops were stationed, soldiers and

civilians were frequently seen chatting, many of the former apparently in very good spirits.

Special forces at Cristo-Rei

Road traffic on the bridge over the Tagus was normal, though it naturally thinned out because people gradually accepted the advice continually broadcast on the RCP to stay indoors or return home and keep calm.

A large contingent of troops meanwhile gathered at the statue of Christ overlooking the river and set up various artillery pieces. Three of these were aimed at Lisbon and the Tagus, while another was pointed towards the motorway tollbooth area.

Many onlookers approached the surroundings of the monument to see the large build-up of military vehicles and the troops deployed along the wire fencing enclosing the area. Because of the constant toing and froing of onlookers, a unit was ordered to leave its positions in order to ask people to go home so that they did not get in the way.

At the same time, NATO vessels that had been anchored in the Tagus slipped out on schedule for the joint manoeuvres beginning at sea this morning.