

Imran Khan's judicial remand extended till Sept 13 in cipher case

August 30, 2023

Online Desk: A special court, recently established to hear cases filed under the Official Secrets Act, extended the judicial remand of PTI Chairman Imran Khan till September 13 on Wednesday, his lawyer confirmed. It comes a day after the Islamabad High Court suspended the former premier's three-year jail sentence in the Toshakhana case, in which he was convicted on August 5.

However, on the heels of verdict suspension, the special court had directed the authorities of Attock District Jail — where the PTI chief is currently incarcerated — to keep him in “judicial lockup” and produce him today in connection with the cipher case. The cipher case pertains to a diplomatic document which reportedly went missing from Imran's possession. The PTI alleges that it contained a threat from the United States to oust Imran from power. Proceedings against Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the PTI vice chairman and former foreign minister, are also under way in the same case.

A day ago, in a letter addressed to the Attock jail superintendent, a copy of which is available with Dawn.com, Special Court Judge Abual Hasnat Muhammad Zulqarnain said that Imran was “ordered for judicial remand in case FIR mentioned above, who is already detained in district jail, Attock”. Last night, a notification issued by the law ministry said the interior ministry had conveyed “security concerns” to it in a letter and that the Law and Justice Division had “no objection” to Imran's trial in the cipher case being held at Attock jail.

Subsequently, today, Judge Zulqarnain reached the Attock jail where he held an in-camera hearing of the case in the deputy superintendent's office. Prior to the hearing, the police had barred the PTI's legal team from going inside the jail, saying that only one lawyer was allowed inside.

Speaking to reporters outside the jail after the hearing, Imran's lawyer Barrister Salman Safdar asserted that the case against the PTI chief under the Secrets Act was “baseless” and said he would file a bail petition today. He added: “The trial has not even started. Evidence is presented during the trial. Political cases are being made against the PTI chairman.” A while later, the PTI's legal team — comprising Safdar, Intizar Panjutha, Naeem Haider Panjutha and Ali Ijaz Battar — was allowed to enter the jail.

Imran was presented before the court while the Federal Investigation Agency's (FIA) team and the PTI's legal team were also present during the hearing. The PTI chief's legal team marked his attendance today. When the hearing concluded, Judge Zulqarnain departed from the jail to return to Islamabad.

On Monday, the special court had extended Qureshi's remand by two days, which concludes today. Later, Barrister Safdar confirmed to Dawn.com that the court extended Imran's judicial remand by 14 days and also issued a notice on his post-arrest bail plea, seeking a reply from the respondents by September 2. Talking to the media, Safdar said he met Imran, who was in “high spirits” and was “positive”. He added that the PTI chief gave him a briefing for 15 minutes detailing his stance on the cipher case.

The barrister asserted that proceedings under the Secrets Act were “reserved for the armed forces regarding internal matters, such as spying [and] mapping”. He termed the prosecution of a former premier and a former foreign minister (Qureshi) as “highly condemnable and very concerning”. He said that “no one” in the PTI's legal team or even Imran himself knew that he had been detained on judicial remand in the cipher case “for the past 15 days, when the FIA had requested for his physical remand but it was rejected”.

He then confirmed that the special court will hear the bail plea on Saturday and that the court also issued notices to the FIA on two other petitions — one challenging the trial of Imran in the cipher case and the second requesting an open hearing of the case.

Presenting Imran's stance on the cipher case, Safdar stated that former interior minister Rana Sanaullah had admitted on social media that the original cipher was with them. "The FIA has also admitted that the original document of the cipher is with the Foreign Office," he added.

Referring to the two meetings held by the then cabinet, the lawyer asserted that the cipher's contents were discussed there and the then government had "declassified the cipher and the minutes of that meeting are with the Cabinet Division". "The day the cipher was declassified, it no longer remained an official secret," he said, asking for what purpose then was this case for.