

Clashes erupt in Pakistan as police try to arrest Imran Khan

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Online Desk: Clashes between Pakistan's police and supporters of former Prime Minister Imran Khan persisted outside his home in the eastern city of Lahore on Wednesday, a day after officers went to arrest him for failing to appear in court on graft charges. The police operation triggered clashes between Khan's supporters and police in the country's major cities, including Karachi, Islamabad, the garrison city of Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Quetta and elsewhere in Pakistan.

For the past 18 hours, police were firing tear gas at the house as the 70-year-old opposition leader's supporters hurled rocks and bricks at the officers. The upscale area of Zaman Park where Khan lives was under siege since Tuesday. The government was sending additional police to tackle the situation after hundreds of Khan's supporters showed unexpected perseverance. Early Wednesday, Khan emerged from his house to meet with his supporters, who faced tear gas and police batons the whole night to save him from arrest. He said he was ready to travel to Islamabad on March 18 under his arrest warrant, but police did not accept the offer. The confrontation outside Khan's house continued.

About a dozen police and some 35 of Khan's supporters were reported injured. Tear gas shells and pieces of bricks littered the pavement as Khan's followers fought back with batons they had brought to resist police, who were preparing for a final effort to arrest Khan. Khan, who was ousted in a no-confidence vote in Parliament in April, was ordered to appear before a judge in Islamabad on Friday to answer charges of illegally selling state gifts he had received during his term as premier and concealing his assets.

The former premier has avoided appearances before the court since November, when he was wounded in a gun attack at a protest rally in the eastern Punjab province, claiming he was not medically fit to travel from Lahore to Islamabad to face indictment. Last week, he went to Islamabad to appear before three courts, but he failed to appear before the fourth court to face indictment in the graft case, which is a legal process for starting his trial. Khan has claimed that the string of cases against him, which includes terrorism charges, are a plot by the government of his successor, Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, to discredit the former cricket star turned Islamist politician.

On Tuesday, Sharif told Pakistan's Geo television that Khan's arrest was ordered by a court, and it was not political victimization. "We will arrest him, and will do it on a court order," Shahzad Bukhari, deputy-inspector general of Islamabad police, told reporters earlier in Lahore. Later, Bukhari was also lightly injured in the violence and received first aid from police medics at the scene. However, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, a top leader from Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, said the government was trying to disrupt law and order by sending police to Khan's house.

"We are ready to find a middle way through talks with police, but we should know what the purpose of today's police raid is," he said. "Don't worsen the situation. Let us sit and discuss what you want," Qureshi asked the police. He said Khan could consider voluntarily offering his arrest, "but let us talk first." Fawad Chaudhry, another senior party leader, said Khan's legal team was in the process of submitting a request to the Islamabad High Court to have warrants against Khan suspended. Khan's lawyers were also legally challenging the warrants before another Islamabad court Tuesday.

From inside his home, Khan urged his followers to fight on even if he is arrested. "They think this nation will fall asleep when Imran Khan is jailed," he wrote on Twitter. "You need to prove them wrong." Police said reinforcements were on their way to Khan's house to bring the situation under control. TV footage showed tear gas shells falling inside Khan's house.

Angered over the expected arrest of Khan, his supporters took to the streets across Pakistan, blocking some key roads near Islamabad while asking the government to refrain from arresting Khan. “We will arrest this man on the court order and he ran away to avoid arrest,” said Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah Khan, who is not related to the former premier. He said Khan will be produced before the court.