

Imran Khan calls for immediate talks amidst stand-off with military

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Online Desk: Former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan on Friday appealed for immediate talks with state officials, as pressure increased on him amidst a crackdown on his top aides and supporters that has seen thousands arrested as well as many leaving his party. Khan has been embroiled in a tussle with the military since he was removed from power last year in a parliamentary vote that he says was orchestrated by the country's top generals. The military denies this.

The stand-off intensified when earlier this month Khan's supporters were involved in violent protests following his brief arrest on May 9, reports Reuters. "I would like to appeal for talks, because what is currently happening is not a solution," Khan said in a live talk streamed on YouTube, warning that the country was headed towards anarchy.

The political unrest has worsened as Pakistan faces its worst economic crisis in decades. Inflation is at record highs, economic growth is anaemic, and there are fears that the country could default on external debts unless the International Monetary Fund unlocks delayed disbursements.

PARTY RESIGNATIONS

Most of Khan's top aides were arrested a shortly after his supporters stormed and set ablaze a number of military installations across the country. Many have been released and shortly after announced their resignations from Khan's party. Dozens of other mid-tier leaders have also left.

Khan said they were being made to resign under duress in a bid to weaken him and dismantle his party. He distanced his party from the attacks on military installations during the unrest that followed his arrest and reiterated a called for an investigation to determine who was involved. Khan's party members have said they were leaving of their own free will. Many of them cited concerns for their family and health.

The former premier, however, struck a defiant tone, warning that his party's popularity was only rising because of the crackdown and would still win an election whenever it was held. He said he only wanted to talk to take the country out of the current crisis.

A national election is scheduled to be held by November, and polls show Khan remains the country's most popular leader. Khan had said earlier this week that he would set up a committee to hold negotiations. He says previous attempts to speak to the country's powerful generals had gone unanswered. The civilian government, a coalition of his political rivals, has not indicated that it was willing to talk as the crackdown on his party continued.

MILITARY COURTS

The appeal for talks came as the pressure mounted on his party and supporters, 33 of whom been handed over to the army to face trial in military courts on charges of attacking armed forces' installations, Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah said on Friday.

The 33 accused are among the thousands detained since Khan's May 9 arrest sparked violent protests across Pakistan. Khan was arrested on graft charges, which he denies, and was subsequently released on bail. "The accused who are being handed over to the military are those who trespassed and entered very sensitive defence installations," Sanaullah told a press conference in Islamabad. He said only those involved in breaching out-of-bounds areas would face trial under army laws, suggesting there would not be mass trials in military courts.

But in response to a question, he also suggested that Khan could also be tried in a military court, saying: “as far as my own assessment and the evidence we have... this man is the architect of all this mess and planning, so yes he comes under this category.”

Rights groups have raised concerns over military trials of civilians, saying they cannot ensure a fair trial. Such courts are closed to outsiders and the media. The minister said after a verdict from the military courts the accused would have a right to appeal to a high court and then the Supreme Court.