

Pakistan demand response

Thousands of protesting supporters of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan stormed the heavily guarded Pakistani capital, Islamabad, on Tuesday, escalating their face-off with the government and its military backers for his release.

At least six people, including four paramilitary soldiers, were killed during clashes between security forces and protesters, led by Khan's wife, who made it all the way to the edge of the city's highly fortified red zone, before being pushed back by hundreds of security force personnel.

Zulfikar Bukhari, spokesman for PTI, said two protesters had also been killed and 30 injured in the clashes, the worst political violence seen in months in the South Asian nation of 241 million people.

One of the protesters was shot dead and the other was run over by a vehicle, Bukhari said. Authorities did not respond to a query seeking to confirm the deaths and Reuters could not independently verify the information.

Amnesty International said the government must fully protect the rights of protesters and immediately rescind "shoot-on-sight" orders that it said gave undue and excessive powers to the military.

Reuters reporters saw some of the marchers ransack vehicles and set a police kiosk on fire. They also attacked and wounded journalists at two separate locations, people from two media houses told Reuters.

PTI supporters last marched on Islamabad in October, sparking days of clashes with police in which one officer was killed, but this week's protest is bigger in size and more violent, authorities said.

They said the protesters were now armed with steel rods, slingshots and sticks and were setting fire to trees and grass as they marched. Reuters witnesses heard firing around the protests, although it was not clear who was responsible.

"A political solution, one with negotiations and concessions, is the only way out of this crisis," he said. "But this is an especially bitter and personal confrontation between two sides taking maximalist positions on everything."

Voted out of power by parliament in 2022 after he fell out with Pakistan's powerful military, Khan faces charges ranging from corruption to instigation of violence, all of which he and his party deny.

Pakistani authorities have arrested nearly 1,000 supporters of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan after they stormed the capital this week demanding his release, the city's police chief said on Wednesday.



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