

International

Pakistan ex-PM Imran Khan fears arrest as he heads to court

Security situation deteriorating with a spate of deadly attacks on police

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan said on Saturday he expected to be arrested as he headed to court on graft charges, after days of legal wrangling and pitched battles between his supporters and police. The 70-year-old former cricket star has been tangled in a slew of court cases, a frequent hazard for opposition figures in Pakistan's mudslinging politics.

Khan was ousted in a no-confidence motion last year and has been pressuring the fragile coalition government which replaced him to hold early elections. "I am going to the Islamabad court right now. I want to tell you all that they have made a plan to arrest me," he said in a video message from the motorway, claiming he was the target of a plot to stop him from standing in elections due by October.

"The point of their attack on my house was not to present me before the Islamabad court. The purpose was to put me in jail." Some 4,000 security officials including elite police commandos, anti-terrorism squads and paramilitary rangers have been deployed around Islamabad with hospitals put on high alert.

Police fired tear gas at supporters who had gathered at the court in anticipation of Khan's arrival, chanting and pelting stones and bricks at officers. Earlier this week Khan's supporters fought pitched

battles with police sent to arrest him in the eastern city of Lahore after he failed to appear in court, citing security concerns. Authorities were later stood down after a flurry of court hearings and Khan's promise to appear in the capital on Saturday. Police meanwhile raided his house in a plush Lahore neighbourhood after blocking nearby roads and suspending mobile services in the area.

The case has been brought by the Election Commission of Pakistan which has accused Khan of not declaring gifts received during his time as premier, or the profit made from selling them. Pakistan's courts are often used to tie up lawmakers in lengthy proceedings that rights monitors criticise for stifling political opposition.

As the political drama unfolds, Pakistan is in the grip of a stark economic downturn, risking default if help cannot be secured from the International Monetary Fund. The security situation is also deteriorating with a spate of deadly attacks on police, linked to the Pakistan Taliban. Khan has been pressuring the coalition government that replaced him, led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, with popular rallies and daily addresses broadcast on social media. Last year Khan was shot in the leg during a political rally, an assassination bid he blamed on Sharif. — AFP



LAHORE: Supporters of Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan guard Khan's residence in Lahore on March 17, 2023. A Pakistan court declined to cancel an arrest warrant for former prime minister Imran Khan, one of his lawyers said. — AFP



LAGOS: Lagos Governor and Ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) candidate to re-election Babajide Sanwo Olu (C) waves to supporters after voting at a polling station for a gubernatorial and House of Assembly candidates during local elections, in Lagos. — AFP

Nigeria elections open in shadow of contested vote

LAGOS: Nigerians were voting in local elections Saturday, just weeks after the ruling party won a presidential poll that the two main opposition parties alleged was marred by fraud. Africa's most populous nation is electing hundreds of state assembly lawmakers and over two dozens governors, with a particularly competitive contest in the nation's economic nerve centre, Lagos. Governors are powerful positions in Nigeria, with some controlling state budgets that are larger than those of several African nations. Polling units were to be open from 8:30 am (0730 GMT) and close by 2:30 pm (1330 GMT) though delays are frequent and voters in line before closing time should be still be able to vote.

After last month's presidential poll, which was largely peaceful but marked by long delays and technical failures, some voters and opposition parties claimed the mishaps allowed for ballot manipulation.

The electoral commission has rejected claims of rigging but the experience could impact Saturday's vote. On Lagos's wealthy Ikoyi island, polling units were set up early on Saturday, giving some residents hope for a hitch-free day. "We hope this election will be one of the better elections," said Sukiman Abubakar, a 52 year-old estate surveyor. On the mainland, heavy security was deployed with armoured vehicles seen by an AFP reporter at Iyana-Ipaaja and Abulegba, areas prone to violence.

'Politicians have failed us'

As electoral material arrived at Ijaiye, in the Agbado area, around 50 voters were already forming a queue hours early. One of them was Fausat Balogun, a 46-year-old trader who was eager to cast a ballot. "I have been here since 6 am (0500 GMT) to vote for the candidates of my choice. We need fresh blood in Lagos. The old politicians have failed us," he said.

While the megacity of some 20 million people is considered the fiefdom of president-elect Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC), outsider Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) caused a stir by winning most votes on February 25. But whether Obi's popularity and the emergence of a third strong party in Nigeria will translate at the governorship and local assembly levels, especially in Lagos where its former governor Tinubu is influential, remains to be seen.

The Lagos race pits incumbent Babajide Sanwo-Olu (APC) against Gbadebo Rhodes-Vivour (LP) and the main opposition's candidate Olajide Adediran of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Other hotly contested races are expected in southern Rivers and northern Kano, while northeast Adamawa could see the election of Nigeria's first woman governor.

A decisive factor in Saturday's vote will be turnout—with many disappointed in how last month's election was conducted, some voters could decide to stay at home. With President Muhammadu Buhari stepping down in May after two terms, Nigerians had hoped a fair vote would usher in a leader capable of tackling growing insecurity and deepening poverty. Both the LP and the PDP are contesting the February 25 election in a legal battle that could extend over several months. — AFP

800,000 N Koreans enlist to fight 'US imperialists'

SEOUL: More than 800,000 young North Koreans have volunteered to join the army to fight "US imperialists", state media said Saturday, days after Pyongyang test-fired its most powerful intercontinental ballistic missile. After a record-breaking year of weapons tests and growing nuclear threats from Pyongyang, Seoul and Washington have ramped up security cooperation, and this week kicked off their largest joint military drills in five years.

North Korea views all such exercises as rehearsals for invasion and has repeatedly warned it would take "overwhelming" action in response.

The official Korean Central News Agency described the ongoing drills as an American attempt "to provoke a nuclear war" and said that in response, hundreds of thousands of people had enlisted.

The young volunteers are determined to "mercilessly wipe out the war maniacs" so they joined the army to "defend the country", KCNA said. "More than

800,000 youth league officials and students across the country volunteered to join and rejoin the Korean People's Army" on Friday alone, it added.

Images released by Pyongyang's official Rodong Simmun showed young North Koreans waiting in long lines to sign their names at what looks like a construction site. The latest report comes after Pyongyang test-fired its largest and most powerful missile, a Hwasong-17, on Thursday — its second ICBM test this year. State media has described the launch as a response to the ongoing, "frantic" US-South Korea joint military drills. On Saturday, KCNA said the ongoing drills were "inching close to the unpardonable red-line".

Last year, North Korea declared itself an "irreversible" nuclear power, and leader Kim Jong Un recently called for an "exponential" increase in weapons production, including tactical nukes. Kim earlier this month also ordered the North Korean military to intensify drills to prepare for a "real war".

Pyongyang is using the drills to justify their nuclear weapons program domestically as "crucial and necessary," Yang Moo-jin, president of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, told AFP.

This involves "spreading the idea that the South Korea-US military drills ultimately aim to destroy the current North Korean regime and even occupy its capital Pyongyang," Yang added. — AFP



File photo shows North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un (C) and his daughter (front L) observing the Mars Artillery Unit, responsible for important operational missions of the Korean People's Army Western Front, as it conducts fire attack training, at an undisclosed location. — AFP

Serbia, Kosovo hold talks over EU peace plan

OHRID: Kosovo and Serbia leaders gathered Saturday for the latest round of EU-led talks, as the long-time rivals come under increasing pressure to strike a deal to normalise ties. The meeting in North Macedonia comes after the two sides failed to reach an agreement in Brussels last month, where the peace plan was unveiled even as Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic remained at loggerheads over a path forward.

The 11-point document laid out a deal stating that neither side would resort to violence to resolve a dispute, nor seek to prevent the other from joining the European Union or other international bodies—a key demand from Kosovo.

Serbia has long refused to recognise Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence made in 2008, with perennial bouts of unrest erupting between Belgrade and its former breakaway province. Following the talks in Brussels, Vucic vowed never to recognise Pristina or provide a pathway that would allow them to join the United Nations or the NATO alliance. Before the summit hosted by EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, Vucic struck a defiant tone. "I don't plan on signing anything," Vucic told reporters Thursday, saying the meeting "will not be historic or groundbreaking".

The latest round of talks followed months of shuttle diplomacy, nearly 25 years after the war between eth-

nic Albanian insurgents and Serb forces sparked a NATO bombing campaign that ended the conflict. On Tuesday, Kosovo's Kurti said he was optimistic about hammering out a deal but put the onus of signing the agreement with Vucic. "Whether it will succeed or not, you know very well that it does not depend only on me," Kurti told reporters.

'A betrayal'

Analysts said inking the agreement itself would not signal an ultimate breakthrough. "I expect both parties to agree on the implementation plan. I can't say it's big because the big thing will happen only after the plan is implemented," said Dusan Milenkovic from the think tank Center for Social Dialogue and Regional Initiatives. Kurti's administration hopes that a deal would allow for Kosovo's entry into international institutions, a long-sought goal for the government in Pristina.

Serbia's Vucic has said his government is under intense pressure to come to an understanding, while signalling to his domestic rivals that he will not give ground. Kosovo remains an obsession among large swaths of the Serbian population, who regard the territory as their rightful homeland that has come under attack by outsiders for centuries.

In the Serbian capital Belgrade on Friday, thousands rallied against striking a deal with Kosovo. "This ultimatum ... it's not an agreement, it's a betrayal," Milica Djurdjevic Stamenkovski, head of the ultranationalist group the Oath Keepers told the crowd.

Kosovo is home to approximately 120,000 Serbs, many of whom remain loyal to Belgrade—especially in northern areas near the border with Serbia where there are frequent bouts of turmoil, protests and occasional violence. — AFP

Indonesia's Merapi volcano erupts, spews hot lava

JAKARTA: Indonesia's Mount Merapi, one of the world's most active volcanoes, erupted late Friday and continued to spew hot ash and other volcanic material on Saturday. Footage of flaming lava pouring out of the crater and a tall column of hot cloud rising 1,300 metres into the air was taken by the government-run Merapi Volcano Observatory on Friday night.

The volcano continued to spew hot ash and hot lava was visible on Saturday. "Residents should anticipate the disruption due to the volcanic ash from Mount Merapi eruption and please be on alert for the danger of volcanic mudflow, especially when it rains around Merapi," the country's volcanology agency said in a statement Saturday. Merapi also erupted last week, sending volcanic material 9,600 feet (3,000 metres) above the summit. Volcanic ash rain blanketed at least eight villages near the volcano after last week's eruption. Volcanologists said last week the volcano is experiencing its most active phase since 2021.

Merapi has been at the second-highest level alert since 2020 following increased volcanic activity and authorities established a restricted zone of seven kilometres from the summit. The volcano's last major eruption in 2010 killed more than 300 people and forced the evacuation of some 280,000 residents. It was Merapi's most powerful eruption since 1930 when about 1,300 people were killed. An eruption in 1994 left about 60 people dead. — AFP

S Korea moves to 'normalise' military pact with Japan

SEOUL: South Korea will fully implement a key military intelligence-sharing pact with Japan, a defence ministry official told AFP on Saturday, as the two countries move to thaw long-frozen relations and renew diplomacy to counter Pyongyang. At a fence-mending summit on Thursday, the neighbours agreed to turn the page on a bitter dispute over Japan's use of war-time forced labour. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, who has been keen to end the spat and present a united front against the nuclear-armed North, had flown to Japan to meet Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, the first such summit in 12 years.

According to a pool report, Yoon told Kishida he wanted a "complete normalisation" of a 2016 military agreement called the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which enables the two US allies to share military secrets, particularly over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile capacity.

Following the summit, South Korea's foreign ministry was asked "to proceed with the needed measures to normalise the agreement," said a defence ministry official, who declined to be named. The foreign ministry is expected to send a formal letter to its Japanese counterpart soon, the official added.

Seoul had threatened to scrap GSOMIA in 2019 as relations with Tokyo soured over trade disputes and a historical row stemming from Japan's 35-year colonial rule over the peninsula. In response, an alarmed United States said that calling off the pact would only benefit North Korea and China.

Hours before it was set to expire, South Korea agreed to extend GSOMIA "conditionally", but warned it could be "terminated" at any moment. Confronted with Pyongyang's growing aggression and flurry of missile tests, the neighbours have increasingly sought to bury the hatchet.

The increasing security challenge was thrown into sharp relief just before Yoon's arrival in Tokyo on Thursday as North Korea test-fired what it said was an intercontinental ballistic missile. Last year, Pyongyang declared itself an "irreversible" nuclear power, and recently leader Kim Jong Un called for an "exponential" increase in weapons production. — AFP