

Anti-blasphemy protests: Clashes spread across Pakistan, 10 killed, over 250 injured; Army summoned

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Islamabad: The Pakistan government on Saturday launched a cracked down on protesters from hardline religious groups in Islamabad seeking resignation of Law Minister Zahid Hamid. The crackdown left at least 10 dead and more than 250 injured.

Protesters hurls back a tear gas shell fired by police during a clash in Islamabad

The government had to call in the army to restore law and order situation in Islamabad. However, the crackdown was suspended by the government late night.

According to reports, the army will be deployed in various parts of the city to secure main offices of the judiciary, Parliament House, Presidency, PM House, foreign missions, foreign office and other crucial installations.

The decision to call in army was taken after a violent clash between police and protesting people. The Interior Ministry did not specify when the troops would be deployed, and no soldiers were visible on the streets late Saturday.

The government acted under article 245 of the Constitution to deploy the army to control the situation. The development came hours after Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa spoke to Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi over the telephone and discussed the security situation.

The government also ordered suspension of private TV channels and blocked popular social media sites.

Supporters of an Islamist group have been camped out at a key intersection outside the capital for the last 20 days, and the protest has triggered similar demonstrations across the country.

The supporters of the Tehreek-i-Labaik Ya Rasool Allah party are demanding the resignation of a Law Minister over an omitted reference to the prophet in a parliamentary bill. The minister, Zahid Hamid, apologized for the omission "a phrase saying that Muhammad is the last prophet in Islam" saying it was a clerical error that was later corrected.

But protest leaders were adamant and refused to clear the intersection unless the law minister resigned.

Protestors said that the action undermined Islamic beliefs and linked it to blasphemy.

Saturday's action came after a court ordered an end to the protest because it was disrupting daily life.

Smoke rises as Pakistani police officers fire tear gas shell to disperse protesters during a clash in Islamabad

Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal, meanwhile, said that the government had shown patience in dealing with the protesters.

"The administration is taking action under court order but still we are open for talks with them," he said, referring to the protesters.

Ahsan said that some among the protesters wanted to create chaos and destabilization in the country.

Some protesters who escaped the operation later gathered at a main street in Rawalpindi blocking it and suspending traffic by throwing stones at moving vehicles.

In Karachi, groups gathered at three crucial venues blocking streets in protest against the police action in Islamabad. When police used tear gas to disperse them amid the traffic rush hours, protesters threw stones wounding 20 people, including two journalists.

Protesters also took to the streets in Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan, Khanewal, Layyah, Vihari, Dera Ghazi Khan and others cities in Punjab province and in the northwestern city of Peshawar, as well as in southern city of Hyderabad, to show solidarity with the Islamabad protesters.

Pakistani protesters gather next to burning police vehicles after setting on fire them during a clash in Islamabad

In Lahore, an unruly mob torched a vehicle and damaged others with stoning and staged sit-ins at four key areas in the city.

Malik Mohammad Ahmed, the spokesman for Punjab government, said enraged protesters in Rawalpindi attacked the residence of the former interior minister, Chaudhry Nisar, damaging the main gate.

He added that they wounded lawmaker Javed Latif in Shaikhupura, hitting him in the head with a stone, and that a furious crowd attacked Law Minister Zahid Hamid's villa in Pasroor, ransacking the place.

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