

No money to run country: PM

Page No.01 Col NO.06

ISLAMABAD: Urging civil servants to fully support the ambitious reforms agenda of the government since it is aimed at securing future generations, Prime Minister Imran Khan on Friday said the country is short of funds and there is a need to pull together. Addressing selected civil servants at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), he assured them of protection from political pressure. He said that quick postings and transfers are most disruptive for governments. Addressing issues pertaining to salary structure of civil servants, he said if bureaucrats were paid good remuneration, there would be no temptation.

"The salaries are not enough for them to survive," he said and added, "We will work with full force. I will protect you from political pressure and will not allow you to be humiliated during the process of accountability. I only want that you support this ambitious reforms programme fully. It is not for me, it is for our children."

He asked the civil servants to support the government through a "down cycle" over the next two years and support its "out-of-the-box" policy reforms. Highlighting various challenges being confronted by the nation, the prime minister said, "We don't have the money to run our country. Majority of the population is young and looking for jobs. We took loans instead of creating wealth so that we could repay them. With these loans, we have created projects that are running into losses."

He discussed statistics on out-of-school, malnourished children, and high mortality of women in labour, and infant deaths due to waterborne diseases. Surprisingly, there hasn't been an outrage over these matters, he said. "We need to get out of this debt trap and we need to change ourselves and our nation," he told the civil servants.

"If you look at history, nations make it through challenges when the people and the government become one. The army is also more effective when the nation is behind it," he said. The government must assume responsibility for the people and the people themselves must own the government as their own, he added.

"Nothing is impossible; but for that, people need to change," he said. Khan contented, "Maybe God has created this crisis because He wants us to change. We will change when we start thinking before spending a single rupee about the children who are out of school. Look at Singapore. They have exports of \$303 billion but we have exports of \$20 billion. They have a knowledge economy. We have so many universities here that feature in the top 500 in the world."

He said, "We as leaders need to understand and ask ourselves if we can spend the money on the people of Pakistan that we are spending on ourselves. I ask this of all our leadership and our executive committee here. And I hope that you, the executive

arm of this country, whatever policies we make will help us implement them. Unless you implement them, we cannot be successful."

"Accountability is our cornerstone and without it we cannot progress. Corruption is our biggest issue. It isn't just the looted money that is a problem, but the destruction of institutions in the process that is a great issue," he said. The prime minister said, "If Imran Khan wants to plunder money, he will have to ruin the National Accountability Bureau and post his men in senior positions everywhere. Otherwise, I'll get caught. If there is transparency in the west, it isn't because they are more honest, it is because their institutions are strong and they are afraid of getting caught." He said that accountability is important for the country. "I received some complaints about bureaucracy and I spoke to the NAB chairman. I said, 'If you do investigate any bureaucrat, do not humiliate him, do it subtly. If the bureaucrat takes chances and doesn't do the work, we won't be successful, however useful policies we may make taking risks and thinking out-of-the-box.'"

Khan was of the view that people 'take chances' and make mistakes. "I've made a lot of mistakes myself. It isn't a bad thing. But you must differentiate between that and stealing money. I give you my assurance that if you have committed any mistakes, I will stand with you and ensure that there is no undue pressure on you," he said.

He made it clear to the civil servants that "whatever your political affiliation, whether you like Imran Khan and PTI or not, this doesn't concern me. I am only concerned with your performance. If you perform for my country, we will stand with you and help you." He regretted the "degeneration" of the civil services over time due to political interference.

"I want our bureaucracy to be at the same level as it was [in the 60s]," he said. Giving the example of his party's reform of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's police force, he said it was done because it was "isolated from political pressure. We didn't allow any interference. It was very difficult because our political class is accustomed to this. We bore the pressure; there was a lot of pressure from our MPs. They would tell us 'We can't win the election this way'".

He said, "We trained them, did selection on the basis of merit. And they are now a model police force that we hope to replicate in Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan." He said, "We want our bureaucracy to be the same way — promoting people on the basis of merit, isolated from political pressure. When your performance is built on merit, you rise to the top on your own."

He said, "In 1935, I was reading that a commissioner with his salary could buy 70 tolas of gold. My father, who was a government engineer in the 1970s, could buy a car with one month's salary." He said, "I ask you will have to bear this difficult time, it won't last long. Countries have cycles. No country goes straight to the top. You must look at it as a down cycle. But there is great potential in Pakistan. If we fix the governance structure, there is so much potential in this country." He said that they

can't imagine how much money overseas Pakistanis have. "That money doesn't come here because of a lack of faith in governance," he added.

"We will have so much money for the salaried class that you will be able to give your children quality private education. I was reading about the Singapore model — they would give their civil servants the best salaries so that they wouldn't have any temptation to make money in other ways. I recognise that this is a difficult time, inflation is high, and your salaries don't match your qualifications. But if you decide to make it through the next two years, you can write it down that if we fix our governance in these two years, there will be so much money [to go around] in this country."

He expressed the hope that debt will go down, employment will increase, and Pakistan will be attractive in the world as an investment and tourist destination. He recalled that the proposed reforms in civil services are being drafted by a task force headed by Muhammad Shahzad Arbab.