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Protests erupt over Rushdie knighthood

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Protesters burn effigies of Queen Elizabeth and Salman Rushdie

ISLAMABAD: Thousands burned effigies of Queen Elizabeth and Salman Rushdie yesterday as the country's parliament renewed a call for Britain to withdraw the novelist's knighthood.

Demonstrators took to the streets in several cities amid growing anger at Britain's decision to honour the author of 'The Satanic Verses', which some Muslims consider blasphemous.

A crowd of around 300 people in the capital Islamabad, watched over by riot police carrying batons and shields, chanted "Our struggle will continue until Salman Rushdie is killed!"

"Britain must withdraw the knighthood and hand Rushdie to Pakistan to be punished under Islamic laws," Fazalur Rehman, a pro-Taliban cleric and leader of the parliamentary opposition, told the protesters. In the southern commercial hub of Karachi more than 1,000 people chanting 'Death to Rushdie, Death to Britain' gathered outside the city's main Binori mosque.

The protesters chanted that they backed comments made in parliament on Monday by Religious Affairs Minister Ijaz-ul Haq that Rushdie's knighthood justified suicide bombings.

They hit out at former prime minister Benazir Bhutto for calling for Haq's resignation.

Britain earlier this week expressed "deep concern" over the remarks, when the British envoy to Islamabad was summoned to the Pakistani foreign office to receive a complaint about the award.

In the central city of Multan there were several protests, the largest drawing some 600 people. Members of the local paramedics association torched effigies of Rushdie and the queen, an AFP photographer said.

Around 700 activists and members of cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan's party chanted 'Curse Rushdie, Long Live Osama' in the northwestern city of Peshawar.

Hundreds of protesters burned tyres and posters from a local cinema in the eastern town of Gujrat. They also set fire to a Rushdie dummy and blocked the main road through the town for two hours.

Several hundred protesters also gathered in the eastern city of Lahore and in Quetta, a southwestern city near the Afghan border.

Earlier the national assembly - the lower house of parliament -unanimously passed a resolution again calling for London to revoke Rushdie's honour. It issued a similar call on Monday.

"This house again demands the British government take back the award from blasphemous Rushdie and apologise to the Islamic world," said the new resolution, moved by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Sher Afgan Niazi.

A legislator from the party of exiled former premier Nawaz Sharif called for Rushdie to be murdered. "Whosoever kills him will be the hero of Muslims," Khwaja Saad Rafiq told the assembly.

Pakistani traders offered a Rs10mn (\$165,000) reward late Thursday for anyone who beheads Rushdie, while a group of scholars awarded Osama bin Laden their highest honour in a tit-for-tat move.

Iran's clerical regime sentenced Rushdie to death in 1989.

Meanwhile the chief minister of southern Sindh province, Arbab Ghulam Rahim, said he was returning to the British High Commission a medal given to his grandfather by King George VI in 1937 and a title awarded to his uncle by the British in 1945.

"I will now return these as no Muslim can accept any title from the queen after she honoured Salman Rushdie," he said. – AFP

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