

Won't negotiate with Saudi-led nations, says Qatar

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Washington: Faced with a sweeping set of demands, Qatar insisted Friday it can indefinitely survive the economic and diplomatic steps its neighbours have taken to try to pressure it into compliance, even as a top Emirati official warned the tiny country to brace for a long-term economic squeeze.

Representational pic - Won't negotiate with Saudi-led nations, says Qatar

Given 10 days to make a decision, Qatar said it was reviewing the specific concessions demanded of the tiny Persian Gulf nation, which include shuttering Al-Jazeera and cutting ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. But Qatari officials didn't budge from their previous insistence that they won't sit down with Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations to negotiate an end to the crisis while under siege.

"I can assure you that our situation today is very comfortable," Qatari Ambassador to the US Meshal bin Hamad Al Thani said. "Qatar could continue forever like that with no problems."

Asked whether Qatar felt pressure to resolve the crisis quickly, he said: "Not at all."

As the United States stepped back from any central mediating role, all sides seemed to be settling in for a potentially protracted crisis. Qatar's neighbors insisted their 13-point list of demands was their bottom line, not a starting point for negotiations. If Qatar refuses to comply by the deadline, the Arab countries signaled, they'll continue to restrict its access to land, sea and air routes indefinitely, as economic pressure mounts on Qatar.

"The measures that have been taken are there to stay until there is a long-term solution to the issue," Emirati Ambassador to the US Yousef al-Otaiba said. Suggesting the penalties would only be economic and diplomatic, he said "there is no military element to this whatsoever."

Having urged Qatar's neighbors to come up with "reasonable and actionable" demands, the US sought to distance itself from the crisis the day after the Arab countries issued a list that included several provisions Qatar had already declared it could not or would not accept. But the ultimatum was quickly rejected by Qatar's ally, Turkey, and blasted as an assault on free speech by Al-Jazeera, the Qatari broadcaster that the gas-rich country's neighbors are demanding be shut down.

The demands from the Saudis, the Emiratis, the Egyptians and the Bahrainis amount to a call for a sweeping overhaul of Qatar's foreign policy and natural gas-funded influence peddling in the region. Complying would force Qatar to bring its policies in line with the regional vision of Saudi Arabia, the Middle East's biggest economy and gatekeeper of Qatar's only land border.

"This reflects basically an attempt from these countries to suppress free media and also undermine our sovereignty," said Al Thani, the Qatari envoy. "They are trying to impose their views on how the issues need to be dealt with in the Middle East. They are bullies."

The demands include shutting news outlets, including Al-Jazeera and its affiliates; curbing diplomatic relations with Iran; and severing all ties with Islamist groups including the Muslim Brotherhood. The United Arab Emirates said the list was intended to be confidential. The AP obtained a copy from one of the countries involved in the dispute.

The four countries cut ties with Qatar earlier this month over allegations that it funds terrorism — an accusation President Donald Trump has echoed. Qatar vehemently denies funding or supporting extremism but acknowledges that it allows members of some extremist groups such as Hamas to live in Qatar, arguing that fostering dialogue is key to resolving global conflicts.

The move by Qatar's neighbors has left it under a de facto blockade. Although residents made a run on the supermarket in the days after the crisis erupted, the situation has since calmed as Qatar secured alternative sources of imported food from Turkey and elsewhere. Yet resisting the demands could prove difficult.

"The four states can afford to wait, but Qatar cannot," said Fawaz Gerges, a Middle East expert at the London School of Economics. "This crisis could threaten the political stability of the ruling family in Qatar in the long term if it lasts."

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has tried to mediate and earlier this week called on the Arab nations to limit themselves to "reasonable and actionable" demands. That call appeared to have been roundly ignored, and it was the Kuwaitis — who also offered to mediate — who delivered the list Thursday to Qatar.

"This is an Arab issue that requires an Arab solution," Otaiba said. "That's why the Kuwaitis will take the lead in the negotiation."

That's just fine, the US said. At the White House, spokesman Sean Spicer called it a "family issue" among Arab states and declined to say whether the newly articulated demands were legitimate.

"This is something that they want to and should work out for themselves," Spicer said. Thrust into the middle of the crisis, the head of Al-Jazeera's English language service said the network remained committed to continuing its broadcasts.

"Any call to close to down or curtail Al-Jazeera is nothing but an attempt to muzzle a voice of democracy in the region and suppress freedom of expression," he said by phone.

Underscoring the growing seriousness of the crisis, state-run Qatar Petroleum acknowledged Friday that some critically important employees "may have been asked to postpone" trips abroad "for operational reasons" due to the embargo. It described the move as "a very limited measure that could take place in any oil and gas operating company" to ensure uninterrupted supplies to customers.

Qatar's neighbors are also demanding that it:

— Curb diplomatic ties with Iran, and limit trade and commerce.

— Stop funding other news outlets, including Arabi21, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed and Middle East Eye.

— Hand over "terrorist figures" and wanted individuals from the four countries.

— Stop all means of funding for groups or people designated by foreign countries as terrorists.

— Pay an unspecified sum in reparations.

— Stop all contacts with the political opposition in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain.

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