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Subject: Yemen ruling party, Saleh to meet for crisis talks (Reuters)

SANAA, March 27 (Reuters) - Yemen's ruling party and its leader President Ali Abdullah Saleh will meet for crisis talks on Sunday after Saleh said he was ready to hand over power on condition it be "with dignity".

Saleh, who is under pressure from tens of thousands of Yemenis gathered in the streets demanding his departure after 32 years in power, will update senior party members on his talks with the opposition.

Late on Saturday, Saleh said he was prepared to step down within hours but a deal did not appear imminent since the opposition had hardened their demands.

Saleh has been a key ally of the United States and Saudi Arabia in keeping at bay a Yemen-based resurgent wing of Al Qaeda in a country that is close to collapse, with rebels in the north, secessionists in the south and grinding poverty.

"I could leave power ... even in a few hours, on condition of maintaining respect and prestige," Saleh said in a televised interview. "I have to take the country to safe shores ... I'm holding on to power in order to hand it over peaceably."

More than 80 people have been killed since protests started in January, inspired by popular revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, to demand the departure of Saleh, a serial political survivor of civil war, and separatist, rebel and militant attacks.

On Sunday, Al Arabiya television said six soldiers were killed in an ambush in the south of the country, although it was not clear who was responsible for the attack.

Saleh has offered concessions, first by promising to step down in 2013 when his term ends, and most recently a proposal to transfer power after the drafting of a new constitution and parliamentary and presidential elections by the end of the year.

But the tide against Saleh appears to have turned after plainclothes snipers loyal to the president fired into an anti-government crowd, killing 52 people on March 17.

That led to defections including military commanders such as General Ali Mohsen, ambassadors, lawmakers, provincial governors and tribal leaders, some from his own tribe.

Saleh said the defections were mainly by Islamists and that some had returned to his side. He said Mohsen had been acting emotionally because of Friday's bloodshed but that security forces were not behind the deaths.

A source close to Mohsen, who has thrown his weight behind protesters, said he and Saleh had weighed a deal in which both would leave the country, taking their sons and relatives with them to pave the way for a civilian transitional government.

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