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The Egyptian military chief has warned that the army will not stand by and allow Egypt to fall into "a dark tunnel of conflict", ahead of major anti-government protests planned for next week. General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who is also defence minister, said on Sunday that the army had recently tried to avoid politics, but had a "moral responsibility" to prevent strife and protect "the will of the people". "There is a state of division in society, and the continuation of it is a danger to the Egyptian state. There must be consensus," he said. The military took power in February 2011, after the revolution that toppled longtime president Hosni Mubarak. Civilian rule was only reinstated last June, when Mohamed Morsi became Egypt's first democratically elected president. That 16-month transitional period led to widespread public criticism of the military, which Sisi alluded to in his remarks on Sunday. Many analysts believe the memory of that period has left the army reluctant to intervene again. It was unclear what, exactly, Sisi was describing as "the will of the people". Major protest planned Opposition groups are planning a major protest on June 30 to mark the one-year anniversary of Morsi's inauguration and demand his resignation. There are widespread fears that the demonstrations could turn violent: At a pro-government rally on Friday, several speakers threatened to "crush" the opposition. Two people have already been shot dead in clashes over the weekend. Sisi urged parties and political factions to use the week leading up to the protests to reach consensus. A spokesman for the opposition National Salvation Front, called Sisi's statements "very reasonable". "We are facing direct threats from supporters of president Morsi to spill blood if we exercise... our democratic right to demand peacefully early presidential elections." Ahmed Ali, an army spokesman, told Reuters news agency that Sisi's comments were intended as a "supportive message that the army is sending to its people". Morsi appointed Sisi as defence minister last year in a shake-up that replaced the army's top officers, including General Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, Mubarak's longtime defence chief and the country's ruler during the transitional period. A spokesman for the Brotherhood's political party said it was studying Sisi's statement before making public comment. In a separate incident, two men, both Islamists, died as a result of clashes: one was shot dead in Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra, north of Cairo, overnight; the other died of wounds sustained some days ago in Fayoum. The Muslim Brotherhood described both men as "martyrs" and victims of "thugs" or "militia" from the opposition campaign. Brotherhood officials said they suspected Mubarak-era security officers were being paid to attack their supporters. Judge's call condemned Highlighting mutual mistrust, the Brotherhood also denounced as a "political trial" a judge's call on Sunday for an investigation into its role in a mass jail-break during the uprising against Mubarak. Though Islamists control the executive and legislature, they view the judiciary as holdovers from the old regime. A judge in the Suez Canal city of Ismailia, in acquitting a man accused of fleeing a local jail during the 2011 uprising, asked the public prosecutor to investigate what he described as a "conspiracy" by the Brotherhood and foreign Islamists to open up the prison. Among those freed was Morsi himself, who was among hundreds of Brotherhood leaders rounded up when the revolution began. The freeing of Palestinian fighters from Hamas and Lebanese members of the Shia Hezbollah group, among others, has prompted accusations from the Brotherhood's opponents that it connived with enemies of Egypt during the incident. 587

