

Torkham Border Incident

Background:

The Durand Line, modified by the Anglo-Afghan Treaty of 1919, demarcates Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan in northern and western Pakistan from the northeastern, southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan. Afghan discontent over the legitimacy of the Durand Line led to a series of irredentist claims to Pakistani territory, and support of separatist movements in support of these claims. Pakistan maintains the legitimacy of the Durand Line and has routinely enforced this border.

Pakistan and Afghanistan depend on broader stability of the region for their own stability. A violent and unstable Afghanistan interferes with Islamabad's ability to address internal issues. Pakistani attempts to enforce the border with Afghanistan have included prior attempts to build gates and walls, and the installation of biometric equipment to track the flow of Afghan nationals in the region. The announcement in 2016 that Pakistan would construct a gate at the Torkham border crossing, which is the busiest border crossing along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, attracted the ire of Afghan officials and Afghan nationals in the region who depended on the border crossing for their survival. The gate's construction was perceived to add legitimacy to the location of the border between the two nations, which Afghanistan has explicitly rejected.

PRE-CRISIS

In the period leading up to 12 June 2016, there were protests by Afghans on both side of the border, as well as action by the Afghan government. It is reported that retaliatory measures were engaged by Pakistan, including attacks on Afghan nationals and the razing of Afghan houses along the Torkham border region. On 11 May 2016, Pakistan closed the border but reopened it on 13 May after meeting with Afghan officials. Though tensions eased momentarily, they were reignited after a US drone strike killed a Taliban leader, Mullah Mansour, in Pakistan on 21 May 2016. This incident caused Pakistani officials to question the ease with which people can cross the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Summary:

Violence broke out at 9:20 p.m. on 12 June 2016, in the city of Torkham, located along the contested Pakistani-Afghan border. This triggered a crisis for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is not known who made the first move—both Afghanistan and Pakistan later blamed each other for initiating. Some reporting suggests that Afghan border police had attempted to halt further Pakistani construction of the gate along the border. The head Pakistani civilian official in the area later claimed that an Afghan commander verbally protested construction of the gate, then returned to his base and turned off the lights. Then, according to the Pakistani official, the Afghans began firing towards the Pakistani side. The Afghans, for their part, claimed that the Pakistanis started firing at the Afghan side first, and had no choice but to respond in kind.

Fighting continued through the night and the following day. The firefight forced the closure of the Torkham checkpoint. Casualties began to mount: by Monday, at least two soldiers were killed, and at least eleven people (including civilians) were injured.

Diplomatic efforts began immediately. Both sides made statements denouncing the violence, emphasized that they responded to aggression initiated by the other, and stressed that the situation remained tense. Both nations rushed reinforcements, including tanks and armored personnel carriers, to the border. Behind closed doors, Afghan and Pakistani officials worked to find a diplomatic solution.

The United States contacted the leadership of both Afghanistan and Pakistan regarding the ongoing violence at Torkham. Although little is known about what was said between the three nations, the U.S. State Department publicly stated its concern with the ongoing violence, noted that it had

reached out to Afghanistan and Pakistan (which are both U.S. allies), and encouraged the nations to reach a peaceful agreement.

By the time a ceasefire deal was reached on 15 June, four soldiers had been killed, and at least 40 other people had been injured. While the ceasefire ended the immediate crisis for both actors, it did little to resolve the deeper roots of longstanding border disagreements. Afghanistan and Pakistan did show some signs of reducing the potential for further violence, as a little over a week later they agreed to establish a new coordination mechanism in order to prevent further border skirmishes. Later in July 2016, Pakistan completed construction of the Torkham gate.

Sources:

Brookings Institute; CIA World Factbook; Dawn; The Diplomat; Express Tribune; Foreign Policy; International Security; National Bureau of Asian Research; New York Times; US State Department Daily Press Briefing