

Border Clashes With Pakistan Leave 15 Afghan Civilians Dead, Officials Say

Anger over the closing of the border because of coronavirus fears triggered demonstrations, and then artillery barrages.

By Taimoor Shah and Mujib Mashal

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — Some of the most intense border clashes between Pakistan and Afghanistan in recent years left at least 15 civilians dead on the Afghan side on Thursday, officials said.

Afghanistan accused Pakistani forces of firing heavy artillery into civilian areas after protests by communities on both sides who were demanding the reopening of a nearby border crossing that Pakistan had closed to try to limit the spread of the coronavirus.

Hayatullah Hayat, the governor of Kandahar Province, where the clashes occurred, said the worst barrage of Pakistani artillery started around 7 p.m. and struck the Spin Boldak area. In addition to the deaths, at least 80 other civilians were wounded, he said. Afghan security officials said they had retaliated with rockets. Social media videos apparently filmed from the Pakistani side showed the dark sky lit up by intense crossfire.

A delegation from the local Pakistani government in Baluchistan Province had arrived at the border to assess the situation, officials in Pakistan said.

Gen. Yasin Zia, the chief of Afghanistan's army, has ordered the three army corps stationed along the border areas to be "fully ready to retaliate to the Pakistani military in kind" and put his country's special forces and air force on the "highest alert," Afghanistan's Defense Ministry said in a statement. The ministry estimated the number of dead at nine, including a child.

Movement across the porous border had been restricted by the Pakistani side in recent months over concern about the pandemic, which has hit both countries hard. The restrictions particularly affected communities on two sides of the Chaman crossing, people who rely on easy border trade, either as laborers or smugglers, for a living.



Afghans arriving to cross the Pakistani-Afghan border in Chaman, Pakistan, in April. Movement across the border had been restricted by the Pakistani side in recent months because of the pandemic. Akhter Gulfam/EPA, via Shutterstock

For several weeks, protesters had staged a sit-in on the Pakistani side of the crossing in Chaman demanding the resumption of normal flow. In June, Pakistan reopened for commercial trucks, but the crossing remained shut for travelers and laborers. The border was opened for travelers stuck on the two sides on Wednesday, but the protest to allow the routine crossing of laborers had continued.

The situation grew tense on the Pakistani side on Thursday, with reports of Pakistani forces opening fire on protesters during clashes and killing at least two people. The protesters torched a Covid-19 quarantine facility. When thousands of travelers stuck on the Afghan side rushed for the crossing in the chaos, they were met by Pakistani fire that also struck Afghan border police facilities. The situation erupted into full-on clashes that intensified late into the night, witnesses said.

Adeel Ahmad, a provincial official in Baluchistan, said Pakistani security forces had denied they targeted civilians and had only fired shots into the air to disperse protesters and maintain order.

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“The daily wage workers, especially, who work on both sides of the border are most hard-pressed and have demanded from the government to lift the restrictions on movement and economic activity,” Mr. Ahmed said. “The locals say that we can no longer tolerate hunger and unemployment and want a solution to the current impasse. The locals are also resisting the government’s plans to introduce passport and biometric systems for cross-border movement.”

Afghan officials and residents in Spin Boldak District said heavy artillery fire from the Pakistani side forced hundreds of families to flee their homes from border villages last night.

The clashes at the southern border came just a week after Afghan officials said Pakistani forces had fired dozens of mortar shells into the Sarkano District of eastern Kunar Province, killing eight civilians.

The two countries share a long border, about 1,500 miles, that was drawn by the British in the 19th century and that left ethnic Pashtun tribes split. Consecutive Afghan governments have questioned the legitimacy of the division, known as the Durand Line, as an official border. Efforts by Pakistan’s government to build reinforced fences and security checkpoints along the border have angered Afghan officials and communities in the area.

Taimoor Shah reported from Kandahar and Mujib Mashal from Kabul, Afghanistan. Reporting was contributed by Salman Masood in Islamabad, Pakistan, and Fahim Abed in Kabul, Afghanistan.