

PAKISTAN BANS BOLLYWOOD FILMS AS TENSIONS ESCALATE

ISLAMABAD: Indian films have been banned in cinemas across Pakistan as tensions between Islamabad and nuclear-armed rivals New Delhi over recent scuffles in the disputed Kashmir region spilled into the world of Bollywood and celebrity. The tit-for-tat retaliation came after Pakistani actors and technicians were banned from working on Bollywood sets by the Indian Motion Pictures Producers Association (IMPPA).

Tensions have been simmering for months between India and Pakistan, but were dangerously ratcheted up Thursday when India claimed it had carried out "surgical strikes" across the heavily militarized Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border in

disputed Kashmir. The rare public admission of such an action on alleged "terrorist" targets prompted furious rhetoric from Pakistan, with both sides reporting fresh cross-border firing but no casualties early yesterday morning.

"It is deeply regrettable that a film trade body, the IMPPA, has passed a resolution to ban Pakistani stars and technicians from working in India," a statement from Pakistan's Film Exhibitors and Distributors group said late Friday.

"Following the IMPPA decision... the majority stake holders of the (Pakistani) film industry have decided to suspend the screening of all Indian films until normalcy returns." Celebrities on both sides of

the border have also weighed in on tensions over the past week. Bollywood star Salman Khan saw a vicious social media backlash after he was reported as saying that Pakistani artists should not be equated with terrorists.

While singer Adnan Sami, British-born but of Pakistani origin who received Indian citizenship last year, has been slated on Twitter by Pakistanis since praising Indian forces. Indian filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt received a similar roasting when he posted an image of himself calling for peace.

"Sadly, there isn't much difference in the level of sanity on both sides," observed Pakistani media website Mango Baaz in a story comparing the

online reactions across the border. Indian movies are screened in a majority of Pakistani cinemas, as filmmakers in the South Asian nation strive to revive its struggling motion picture industry. Many Pakistani singers and film actors have been cast in the Indian films in a bid to improve people-to-people contact between the rival countries. Cinema employees in Karachi were seen removing the giant posters advertising Indian films over the weekend and replacing them with banners for Pakistani and Hollywood movies. India and Pakistan have fought three wars since they gained independence from Britain seven decades ago, two of them over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir. — AFP

INDIA-PAKISTAN TENSIONS STIR WARTIME MEMORIES

NAUSHERA DHALLA, India: As he surveyed his largely deserted village along India's border with Pakistan, Kuldeep Singh cast his mind to his childhood when his home was on the frontline of a full-blown war between the two arch rivals. "All of this reminds me of when I was a boy back in 1971 and I can now understand what my father must have felt like sending me away to live with his relatives back then," said the father-of-three.

"My wife and kids are already getting restless to come back home after three days. I'm also missing them but we don't yet know what's going to happen, so it's better to wait another day or two." The 54-year-old farm laborer sent his wife and three children to live with relatives after a dramatic escalation of tensions between the two nuclear-armed rivals this week which saw India carry out a series of strikes on the Pakistani side of the de facto border in divided Kashmir.

The evacuation order was delivered over the loudspeaker from the local gurdwara (temple) in what is a mainly Sikh village. The Singh family's village of Naushera Dhalla in the northern Punjab state is around 40 kilometers (25 miles) from the Sikh holy city of Amritsar and barely a kilometre from the border.

Like Kashmir, Punjab was also divided between India and Pakistan when both gained their independence at the end of British colonial rule seven decades ago and parts of the state became battlefields when the two countries went to war in 1965 and most recently in 1971.

While India says it has no desire for a further escalation in the situation, it has nevertheless ordered thousands of villagers to move away from the border in case they once again become a theatre of war. While most of Naushera Dhalla's 4,500 residents have sought shelter elsewhere, a few male residents have stayed behind to look after their land and livestock and pro-

tect their property from potential looters.

Speaking to an AFP correspondent while huddled in the centre of the village, those who have remained all said they felt they couldn't afford to do otherwise but had no illusions about what was at stake.

Theatre of war

Lakhvinder Singh, a 58-year-old tailor, said he too had vivid memories of the 1971 war when Naushera Dhalla also emptied in a matter of hours and soldiers took over their rudimentary mud-hut homes. "The shelling and firing started around 5.15pm in the evening and we left by around 9.30pm the same night," he said. "We could see the light of bombs and gunfire in the dark night from both the sides. "It is tense at the moment but I don't think there will be war—there shouldn't be a war. "But if there is, it's people like us who will lose the most. Even though we are happy for what our government has done with an attack on terrorists, we don't think war will do us any good."

The 1971 war, which began after India intervened in the war of separation which led to Bangladesh's (formerly east Pakistan) independence.

Since then, both countries have become nuclear powers, which means that any sharp downturn in relations sends alarm bells ringing in diplomatic circles. In another village even closer to the border, Sohan Singh said he could remember way back to partition when Punjab became the main setting for the largest mass migration in history before becoming a war zone.

Sohan Singh, who gave his age as "about 85", said there was no way that he would take to his heels and desert the small village of Dano Khurd also close to the border. "Where would we go? If we leave, we will starve," said Singh, surrounded by around two dozen male villagers who were all discussing the tensions. "I'll be here for as long as I am alive." — AFP



JAMMU: Indian army soldiers stand on a tank transporter outside an army camp in the village of Jourian, Akhnoor Sector west of Jammu yesterday. — AFP

INDIA, PAKISTAN TROOPS OPEN FIRE AMID TENSION

UN CHIEF OFFERS TO MEDIATE AS BORDER VILLAGES EVACUATED

NEW DELHI: Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged fresh fire across their border yesterday as UN chief Ban Ki-moon offered to mediate between the nuclear-armed neighbors following an alarming spike in tensions.

Two days after Indian troops carried out a series of surgical strikes on militant camps across the Pakistani side of their dividing line in Kashmir, officials said there had been cross-border skirmishes further south.

Although there were no casualties, the pre-dawn exchanges heightened the fear among villagers living along the border, tens of thousands of whom have already been ordered to leave home. "There was small arms fire and mortar shells fire from across the border in Akhnoor sector which lasted for around two hours," Pawan Kotwal, a top civilian official in India's Jammu and Kashmir state, said.

A Pakistan military statement said its troops had "befittingly responded to Indian unprovoked firing" in the Bhimber sector on the Pakistani side.

The exchanges came shortly before Indian army chief Dalbir Singh travelled to Northern Command headquarters, which are in Jammu and Kashmir, to meet soldiers involved in Thursday's strikes. Singh was able to "personally compliment officers and men who successfully executed surgical strikes" during his visit, the army said on Twitter.

The two countries, who were separated at birth at the end of British colonial rule in 1947,

have fought three full-blown wars in the last seven decades—including two over Kashmir. The Himalayan region, the Indian side of which forms the bulk of the country's only Muslim majority state, is at the heart of the latest tensions which have been mounting in the last three months.

Since a charismatic Kashmiri separatist was shot dead by Indian soldiers in early July, more than 80 civilians have been killed in the region, many of whom had joined street protests in defiance of a curfew order.

A Pakistan-based militant group then carried out a raid on an Indian army base in mid-September which killed 19 soldiers, the deadliest such attack in over a decade. Amid massive public anger over the raid, India has sought to isolate Pakistan—whom it accuses of sponsoring militant groups—and has managed to persuade nearly all its other neighbors to boycott a regional summit which was to have been held in Islamabad in November.

India's announcement that it had carried out "surgical strikes" in the early hours of Thursday on militant posts on the Pakistani side of the Kashmiri frontier in turn provoked fury in Islamabad whose prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, denounced what he called "naked aggression".

A Pakistani envoy, Maleeha Lodhi, met Ban at UN headquarters in New York overnight to ask the veteran diplomat to intervene personally. Ban called on "both sides to exercise maxi-

mum restraint and take immediate steps to de-escalate the situation", a statement from his spokesman said after the meeting.

Mediation offer

The UN chief said India and Pakistan should address differences through diplomacy and dialogue, and offered to mediate.

"His good offices are available, if accepted by both sides," the UN spokesman said. Lodhi told AFP "the time has come for bold intervention" by Ban while India's UN mission said there was "no desire to aggravate the situation".

But aware things could yet escalate, India has evacuated thousands of people from near the northern border in Punjab state as well as in Jammu. An AFP correspondent in the Punjab village of Naushera Dhalla said most of its 4,500 residents had moved out, leaving only a small number of men to guard their land. The village was also evacuated in 1971, the last time the pair fought an all-out war. "We take turns to patrol the main road to make sure no thieves or robbers come into the village," said Jamsheed Singh, one of those remaining.

"I haven't had a drop of alcohol for the last four nights because if there is an emergency and any of us are drunk, we may not be able to react as fast as we need." Meanwhile in the Battal sector of Pakistani-controlled Kashmir, normal life has also come to a halt. "Our market is closed as no one dares to venture outside," said shopkeeper Shujaat Kazi. — AFP



AMRITSAR: Indian volunteers from the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) distribute free food to villagers of the India-Pakistan border area in the village of Dhanoa Khurad, some 40kms from Amritsar yesterday. — AFP

CHILDREN HIT BY ARTILLERY IN RESTIVE NORTHERN MYANMAR

YANGON: A two-year-old girl was killed and two children injured yesterday after their village was hit by heavy artillery in Myanmar's rebel-held north, an activist and local resident said, the latest violence to threaten the new government's peace bid.

The shots were reportedly fired in Pu Wang village in northern Shan state, an area bordering China where ethnic minority rebels are locked in a long-running battle with the Myanmar army. Sporadic clashes in the region have displaced tens of thousands of people and dampened enthusiasm for a peace push driven by Myanmar's newly elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

"It happened in the morning today when these three children were playing. Six powerful shots were fired into the village," Ying Sau, a pastor in the ethnic Kachin village, told AFP. His nephew's two-year-old daughter was killed, while two children, ages 5 and 6, were injured and taken across the border to a hospital in China, he said.

Khon Ja, an activist from the Kachin Peace Network, also reported the death and posted photos on Facebook of the injured children receiving treatment in China's Yunnan province.

Both blamed the heavy firing on the Myanmar army, which AFP could not reach for comment. Myanmar's restive

borderlands have been rocked by several outbreaks of violence in recent weeks, only a month after Suu Kyi launched a major peace dialogue aimed at ending the simmering insurgencies.

Her summit brought many key players to the table for early peace talks, though several powerful ethnic militias actively clashing with state troops did not attend.

The US Embassy in Yangon said in a statement Friday it was "deeply concerned" by ongoing fighting in Kachin, a state just north of the town where the children were hit yesterday. "The increase in conflict in this area has led to suffering and displacement of local populations. It also has the potential to undermine the progress and goodwill generated by the recent Union Peace Conference," the embassy said.

Around 100,000 people are currently displaced in Shan and Kachin states due to the violence, according to UN figures. More than a dozen ethnic minority groups have waged insurgencies against the Myanmar army since the country won independence from Britain in 1948.

Suu Kyi, whose new civilian government ends five decades of military rule, is determined to end the fighting. But the conflicts are complex and experts say the peace process will take years. — AFP



JAMMU: Indian villagers, who have migrated from their village close to the border with Pakistan, walk with their bags in Khor in Akhnoor Sector west of Jammu yesterday. — AFP

CHINESE NAVY SHIPS ARRIVE IN MYANMAR FOR FIVE-DAY VISIT

BEIJING: Two Chinese navy ships have arrived in Myanmar's main city of Yangon for a five-day visit, state media said yesterday, the latest move by Beijing to reinforce military ties with its strategically-located southern neighbor.

China has been on a diplomatic offensive since the government of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi came to power in April, aiming to forge good ties with the resource-rich country. Suu Kyi visited China in August, where President Xi Jinping told her he wanted to ensure the "correct direction" of relations, and a senior Chinese military officer went to Myanmar last month.

The two warships, the Xiangtan and the Zhoushan, arrived on Friday, and were met by senior Myanmar military officers, the official Xinhua news agency said. China had a close relationship with Myanmar's former military-run government, and has looked on with some nervousness at its democratization process.

China has been pushing Myanmar to resume work on the Chinese-invested \$3.6-billion Myitson dam project, 90 percent of whose power was originally planned to have gone to China. In 2011, then-President Thein Sein angered China when he suspended work on the dam, at the confluence of two northern rivers in the Ayeyarwady river basin, over environmental protests. — Reuters