

Deaths at banned Pakistani kite festival causes stir

Pakistani politicians Monday condemned authorities for allowing the controversial Basant kite festival, that caused death to at least a dozen people, to be celebrated over the weekend, despite a court ban.

According to conflicting casualty numbers, seven children were among 12 people killed in accidents during the events Saturday and Sunday in Lahore in the central Punjab province. More than 700 people were injured, press reports said.

'Extravagant rulers have allowed the blood bath of innocent citizens just for their own merry making,' Qazi Hussain Ahmad, the head of the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA) religious parties alliance, said in a statement.

Two children, aged six and 11, died after reinforced kite wires slit their throats, while others were hit by stray bullets from aerial firing, fell from roofs or were run over by vehicles while trying to catch kites. One person was also electrocuted while pulling a kite from a power line.

The MMA chief blamed the tragedies on Punjab officials who allowed Basant festivities despite a renewed ban imposed by the Supreme Court.

Kite flying was entirely banned in Pakistan in 2005 because of accidents but the Punjab government independently sanctioned the event in defiance of the ruling in Islamabad.

Heralding the end of winter and the arrival of spring, the Basant festival is celebrated in the entire Indian subcontinent and particularly in Pakistan.

Coinciding with the government's 'Destination Pakistan 2007' tourism drive, this year's festival was to have been more strictly regulated.

Officials had pledged to restrict the size of kites and close shops that produce deadly strings coated with glass or shards of metal for 'kite battles'.

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