

## Deaths in kite festival anger Pakistani conservatives

The death of 18 people due to accidents and violence during the kite flying festival to mark Basant (spring) that was celebrated despite a court ban, has angered Pakistan's clergy and conservatives.

The festival has become controversial with large-scale violation of court-directed safety rules for those flying kites. Jamaat-e-Islami (Jel), the largest Islamist party, held demonstrations Monday in Rawalpindi and other cities. And many groups have given a political twist to the issue.

The fact that the festival was observed over the weekend in Punjab province, with VIPs in attendance, so soon after the death of several Pakistanis in the terror attack on the Samjhauta Attari special train in India, was also raised as a protest point.

The demonstrators appealed to the chief justice of Pakistan to take suo moto notice of the deaths and order an FIR be lodged against Punjab Chief Minister Pervaz Elahi and Governor Khalid Maqbool.

Jel leader Muhammad Kamal criticised the government of adopting 'Western and Hindu cultures' in the name of 'enlightenment and moderation' that President Pervez Musharraf has been advocating.

He said, 'our children's throats are being slit', but the government is preventing demonstrators. Kamal added that the nation was 'grief-stricken' after the Samjhauta Express blasts, 'but the rulers are enjoying Basant Night'.

A few children died after banned reinforced kite wires slit their throats. Many also died after falling from rooftops while flying kites or by stray bullets fired in the air as part of the Basant revelry.

'Basant has turned out to be a bloodbath. This is not an exaggeration,' The Nation newspaper said in an editorial Tuesday.

Criticising the VIP attendance, it said: 'Those at the helm of affairs absolutely insist on celebrating Basant, having their cake and eating it too.'

The Basant festival heralds the end of winter and arrival of spring. Kite flying was banned in Pakistan in 2005 due to recurring accidents but the Punjab government sanctioned the event defying the ruling.

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