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Afghans angry over Quran burning attack US base

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KABUL, Afghanistan: Afghan police on Thursday fired shots in the air to disperse hundreds of protesters who tried to break into an American military base in the country's east to vent their anger over this week's Quran burnings incident.

The fresh violence came one day after clashes between Afghan troops and protesters broke out in the capital and in three eastern provinces over the incident, leaving at least seven people dead and dozens wounded.

The Quran burnings have roiled Afghans and set off riots in an illustration of the intensity of the anger at what they perceive as foreign forces flouting their laws and insulting their culture. The US has apologized for the burnings, which took place at a military base near Kabul, and said it was a mistake.

In the eastern Laghman province, protesters hurled rocks on Thursday and tried to remove the razor wire from the perimeter of the American base in Mehterlam, the provincial capital.

The demonstrators failed to push through and get inside the walls of the facility, which also houses a US-run provincial reconstruction team - a mix of military and international civilians who work to improve local governance, services and infrastructure.

The Laghman reconstruction team is made up of US Army and Air Force service members, and staff from the State Department and the US Agency for International Development.

"Hundreds of our people in Laghman province gathered because of the burning of the holy book by the Americans," said protester Mohammad Issa.

"Everyone is so emotional. The burning of Quran broke our hearts and we are attacking the PRT because they are American," he said, using the acronym for the provincial reconstruction teams.

Police managed to break up the demonstration using water cannons from fire trucks, batons and by firing above the heads of the demonstrators. From a nearby Afghan army base, Afghan soldiers also fired in the air.

"Very professionally we stopped them and ended the protest," said Daoud Barakzai, deputy police chief of Mehterlam. "All the firing was in the air."

He said two protesters were wounded by the gunfire and that most of the crowd of about 2,000 demonstrators were teenagers. Mehterlam is a city of about 100,000.

Two other demonstrations on Thursday were peaceful. Local officials said 500 people demonstrated in the Khoshi district of Logar province and hundreds took to the streets in the eastern city of Jalalabad.

President [Hamid Karzai](#) said he shared the Afghan people's pain at hearing of the Quran desecration, but asked them in a statement late Wednesday to stay calm until an investigation is completed.

The violence was also a reminder of how easily Afghan-U.S. relations can deteriorate as the two countries work to forge a long-term partnership ahead of the withdrawal of foreign forces in 2014.

The unrest started Tuesday when Afghan workers at the main American military base, Bagram Air Field, saw soldiers dumping books in a pit where garbage is burned and noticed Qurans and other religious material among the trash.

The top US and [NATO](#) commander, Gen. John Allen, quickly issued an apology and telephoned Karzai and major news organizations to explain that a collection of religious materials, including Qurans, had been mistakenly sent to be incinerated. As soon as someone realized what they were burning, they stopped and retrieved what was left, Allen said.

Four copies of the Quran were burned before the incineration was halted, according to initial Afghan government reports.

NATO and Afghan investigators on Wednesday visited the Parwan detention facility, from where the Qurans had originated. U.S. officials said they had been taken from the shelves of the facility's library because they contained extremist messages or inscriptions. The White House said it was an accident that they were sent to be burned.

