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Pakistan paving ground for water war: analysts

By Abdul Mueed Hashmi

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By shelling Afghan towns and threatening villagers in eastern provinces to vacate their homes, Pakistan is trying to harness the water of Kabul and Kunar rivers, experts said on Saturday.

Over the past six months, Pakistani forces have been firing artillery shells, rockets and missiles into Dangam and Narai districts of Kunar. So far, a dozen people have been killed and hundreds of families displaced as a result of the attacks.

Residents of three districts -- Lalpura, Momand Dara and Goshta -- in neighbouring Nangarhar province have been in a similar dilemma. On Thursday, a lawmaker and tribal elders alleged Pakistani forces had threatened residents to vacate their homes.

Prof. Mangal Sherzad, a political science teacher at Kabul University, claimed the Afghan government had failed to pressurise Pakistan over the cross-border assaults. He said the two countries blamed each other for insurgent violence on both sides of their porous border, but would not resolve the emerging conflict.

For its part, Pakistan rejects the claim as incorrect. Pakistani troops only respond to and engage militants from where they are attacked, senior military officials in Islamabad say. The neighbouring country also alleges its troops are being attacked by rebels sneaking into Dir and Chitral towns from Afghanistan.

President Karzai has said the issue had been raised in a UN National Security Council meeting and security officials instructed to take the necessary action.

Pakistani Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf on Thursday said Pakistan was attacked from Afghanistan and the issue had been raised in a meeting between the two leaders.

But Prof. Sherzad blamed Pakistan for trying to mislead the international community. He faulted Islamabad's claim that its military installations were being attacked with weapons distributed during the jihad era.

"The real motive behind the Pakistan attacks is to control the water of Kabul and Kunar rivers," the expert believed. He feared if Pakistan extended the undefined Durand Line to the Kunar River, the country could claim half waters of the two rivers under UN laws.

The professor said the Pakistanis were being subjected to long power outages to make them desperate for electricity. He feared Pakistan would try to scuttle the power projects that the Afghan government might initiate on the rivers.

Writer and journalist Sher Alam Amlawal insisted the Pakistani attacks were aimed at blocking construction work on hydropower projects in Kama and Asmar districts. He said the dams were crucial to Afghanistan's economic development and could help produce more electricity than the country needed.

The journalist believed Pakistan wanted to terrorise the tribes living on the Afghan side of the border. "I think Pakistan's goal is to win international recognition of the Kunar River as a natural frontier between the two countries."

A prominent civil society activist, Asadullah Larawai, said Pakistan -- faced with an acute shortage of electricity -- was preparing for a water war with Afghanistan.