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Pakistan warns Afghanistan to show restraint on border

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Pakistan warned Afghanistan yesterday that it would not be responsible for the consequences if a border spat between the two countries escalated further, even as hundreds of Afghans rallied in a southern city to protest the latest incidents along their country's frontier.

The Pakistani warning came one day after Afghanistan lodged a similar protest with Islamabad, blaming its neighbor for a spate of shootouts near the boundary.

Afghanistan had claimed Monday that its forces were fired on in the Goshta district of Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province, the same place where a firefight between Afghan and Pakistani forces left an Afghan border policeman dead and two Pakistani soldiers wounded last week.

Relations between the two neighbors have been severely strained in recent months, and the mountainous region in eastern Afghanistan where the shootings occurred has seen acrimonious exchanges between the two sides over the demarcation of their border.

The Pakistani protest, made to Afghanistan's charge d'affaires in Islamabad, described Monday's incident as an "unprovoked fire incident" that resulted in the wounding of five Pakistani soldiers. A Pakistani statement said the Afghan diplomat was told that "in case of any further escalation as a result of this situation, the responsibility would be on the Afghan government." It added that in Monday's incident "Pakistan security forces exercised maximum restraint." "Pakistan feels that repetition of unprovoked firing incidents are adversely affecting the friendly relations between the two brotherly countries which have covered a long distance in building trust and understanding in the recent years," the statement said.

Although Afghanistan's national security forces have swelled to nearly 352,000 in recent years, their size is tiny compared to a Pakistani military that is one of the 10 biggest in the world. Earlier, hundreds of men marched through downtown Kandahar chanting "Death to Pakistan" and "Death to the ISI," a reference to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, the country's spy agency.

The demonstrators, who dispersed peacefully after the march, were protesting the two shooting incidents along the frontier.

Suicide attack on candidate kills 12 In Parachinar, Pakistan, a suicide bomber on a motorcycle detonated his explosives near a vehicle carrying a candidate from a Islamist party in northwest Pakistan yesterday, killing 12 people in the second attack on the party in as many days, police said.

No one has claimed responsibility for the bombing, but the Taleban took credit for an attack the day before on the same party, claiming it was targeting a candidate who had supported military operations against the militants in the northwest.

The blast yesterday also wounded 35 people, but the candidate from the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party, Mufti Syed Janan, escaped unharmed, said police officer Haleem Khan. The attack occurred as Janan's convoy passed through a market in the town of Doaba in northwest Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, said Khan.

The Pakistani Taleban set off a bomb at a political rally held by Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam in the northwest Kurram tribal region on Monday, killing 25 people and wounding 70, said government official Javed Khan. The targeted candidate was not harmed.

The Taleban have carried out multiple attacks in the run-up to national elections scheduled for May 11. But most of the attacks have targeted secular parties that have opposed the militants and backed the army's attempt to clear them from their sanctuaries in the northwest. Prior to the last two days' bombings, there was concern that the attacks could benefit parties that take a softer line toward the militants, like Jamiat Ulema -e-Islam, because their candidates are able to campaign more freely ahead of the vote.

But the Taleban have also condemned democracy as a whole, meaning that any political party taking part in the elections could be considered fair game by the militant group. Militants have called on people in many areas to stay away from the polls on election day.