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AFP

## Pakistan war games show of force for India: analysts

By Nasir Jaffry

Pakistan is flexing its military might near the Indian border in massive war games analysts say are aimed at putting on a show of force for its nuclear-armed rival.

All branches of the military are taking part in the exercises named "New Resolve", which despite the Taliban militant threat in the northwest have so far focused on drills for conventional war on the eastern border with India.

Fighter jets roared overhead, shots rang out and tanks lumbered through the desert sands in the biggest war games in two decades in the Khairpur Tamewali area of Punjab province, 600 kilometres (about 400 miles) south of Islamabad.

The Pakistan Air Force's F-16s, French Mirages and Chinese-made F-7PGs engaged imaginary targets on the ground with a hail of bombs and missiles.

Up to 50,000 troops will take part in the games, which began on April 10 and will end on May 13 just 60 kilometres from the Indian border.

"The exercise seems to have nothing to do with the western borders," retired Lieutenant General Kamal Matinuddin, a defence analyst, told AFP.

"The way the military demonstrated its prowess by quickly mobilising troops and the war machinery showed the war games are actually focusing on the eastern borders," he added.

"Our armed forces must be capable of responding to emerging challenges on the eastern border by devising new tactics in response to new Indian strategy."

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since independence in 1947 -- two of them over the fate of the Himalayan territory of Kashmir -- and there have been repeated shows of military force on both sides of the border.

Recent tensions with India and reported new military strategy coming from New Delhi "have triggered a hot response from Pakistan," defence and security analyst Brigadier Mahmood Shah told AFP after witnessing the exercises.

"Our military keeps on putting to test its doctrines on the western border with Afghanistan but we really needed to test our capabilities focusing on conventional war on the eastern border," the retired brigadier said.

A campaign of suicide attacks and bombings in Pakistan blamed on the Taliban and other extremist Islamist groups has killed more than 3,200 people in less than three years across the nuclear-armed country of 167 million people.

Pakistan has diverted troops to battle against Taliban militants increasingly seen as a threat to national security in the northwest, with the US also pressuring Islamabad to go after militants who attack in Afghanistan.

The military has launched multiple campaigns in the last year to dislodge Taliban fighters from their strongholds in the northwest -- although the establishment still sees India as the primary threat.

But army chief General Ashfaq Kayani, who witnessed the exercises along with Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and other top civil and military officials, said Pakistan had no aggressive intent.

"We harbour no aggressive designs against anyone but self defence is our inherent right and we will protect Pakistan at all costs," he said at a ceremony attended by reporters flown in to witness the spectacle.

He added that Pakistan's army was "committed to play a positive role in contributing towards strategic stability in the region."

Relations between Pakistan and India have been bedevilled by mistrust and tensions, exacerbated by the November 2008 attacks in the Indian city of Mumbai.

In February, the two nuclear-armed South Asian neighbours held their first official talks since the Mumbai attacks, when 10 Islamist gunmen killed 166 people in the bustling financial capital.

India blamed the attacks on Pakistan-based militants and said talks could only resume if Islamabad took concrete steps to bring those responsible to justice and cracked down on groups operating on its soil.