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Pakistan military warns of nuclear conflict with India

By Raja Asghar

CHAKOTHI, Pakistan (Reuters) - A senior Pakistani army officer said on Monday continued border clashes with India could spark an uncontrollable flareup involving nuclear weapons.

The two neighbours have reinforced positions on either side of their disputed border in Kashmir since a December 13 suicide attack on the Indian parliament which killed 14 people. New Delhi blamed two militant groups based in Muslim Pakistan.

Local sources said on Monday that Pakistan's army had deployed anti-aircraft guns and moved most troops from the eastern garrison town of Sialkot to the border with India.

Pakistani and Indian troops only watched each other with distrust from bunkers on either side of a broken bridge at Chakothi in the west of disputed Kashmir when a group of journalists visited the Pakistani side of the front line.

But both sides reported exchanges of fresh mortar and heavy machinegun fire elsewhere in Kashmir and New Delhi expelled a Pakistani diplomat, raising tensions between the nuclear-armed adversaries ever higher.

Pakistani Brigadier Mohammad Yaqub said the situation was "highly explosive".

"Because in that situation, that tension, even a small little incident can result in a chain reaction which nobody will be able to control," he told Reuters Television at Muzaffarabad, capital of the Pakistani-held part of Kashmir.

He said an all-out war between the two nations could "become really horrific for the entire world".

Asked if nuclear weapons could be used, Yaqub, giving what he called his personal view, said:

"But if there is a war between the two countries and if any country feels that it comes to its own survival, probably there won't be any hesitation to use nuclear weapons."

A brief statement from the military's public relations department said the top-brass of Pakistan's armed forces met in the garrison town of Rawalpindi and "discussed matters relating to defence, national security and professional aspects".

A source in Sialkot, just a few miles from the border in Pakistan's eastern Punjab province, said most of the troops had left the cantonment.

"The movement of troops to and from the border has increased. It is more than in routine times," he said.

Artillery exchanges have increased recently in the Sharkargarh-Zafarwal sector of the working boundary, a 220-km (136-mile) stretch of border between the line of control dividing mountainous Kashmir, and the frontier that runs down the plains in an eastward direction up to the Arabian Sea.

A senior local official in Sialkot said the army movements to and from the border had "not been very obvious," but declined to go into detail.

New Delhi accuses Pakistan of fomenting a decade-old revolt in Muslim-majority Kashmir. Pakistan denies sponsoring the rebellion, saying it only provides moral and diplomatic support to the Kashmiri struggle for self-determination.

Kashmir's main separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference, asked the two nations to exercise restraint in the region, which has triggered two of the three wars they have fought since independence from Britain in 1947.

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