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LAHORE, Pakistan -- The skies over this eastern Pakistani city were once dotted with brightly colored kites that swooped and looped in intense dogfights.

But now the kites have disappeared -- at least for three months. Officials imposed a temporary ban to decide the fate of the popular pastime in Lahore, which has been blamed for injuries and even deaths. Some argue that kite flying is un-Islamic, as well.

The main worry is from a type of kite string that's designed to cut other kites during aerial combat. The cord is reinforced with metal and sometimes glass powder, making it sharp enough to slice through human skin or even electric wires.

Every year, newspapers report gruesome stories about fingers being sliced off or people getting electrocuted because their strings became tangled with power lines. Many kite fliers have also been killed by bits of falling roofs, especially during the peak kite-flying season of Basant, a three-day festival in February celebrating the approach of spring.

Mian Amer Mehmood, chief of the district government, said at least 45 people have died within the past six months in such incidents.

"A game should be a game and not a source of danger to the public," Mehmood said.

Regular kite flyers say the ban is unfair.

"I would come up to my roof to see the kites, but now there are very few left," he said 14-year-old Omair Raza as he sat alone on his roof one recent day. "Why are we being punished? The city should get those who made it a dangerous business and not us."

Besides dangers to people, the city has also been plagued by blackouts, especially in old Lahore, when metal on cut kites fall to earth. Some hit electrical wires, causing short circuits. The city says blackouts every Sunday have cost the city an average of some \$54,000 each weekend. Since the ban began July 1, the kite-related blackouts have decreased significantly, costing the city just over \$2,000 each weekend.

While the city feels that its ban is justifiable, hundreds of shopkeepers, kite flyers and kite makers in Lahore are upset. They have challenged the ban in court under the umbrella of the All Pakistan Kite Flying and Manufacturing Association.

"The ban is likely to affect around 100,000 people, who have lost their only source of livelihood," said Khawaja Shakeel, president of the association.

He added that the deadly strings, not the sport, should be banned.

Getting rid of the string would seem to be an obvious solution. But it could take the fun and sport out of kite fighting -- like asking baseball players to use cardboard bats instead of wooden ones or soccer players to kick balloons instead of leather balls.

But Lahore is not budging from its stand and officials say that anyone caught violating the ban will get three to 10 years in prison.

"There are even proposals that deaths caused by the metal string would be

treated as murder," said Khawaja Khalid Farooq, city police chief.

He said 180 ban violators have been arrested since July 1.

City officials also say that betting on kite flying, especially during Basant, is extravagant and un-Islamic.

During the ban, the city will try to come up with rules to regulate kite flying.

Meanwhile the rooftops and kite shops of old Lahore are empty.

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