

## Spring Is Near, but the Traditional Welcoming Kites of Lahore Are Grounded

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The New York Times, By SALMAN MASOOD  
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QUETTA, [Pakistan](#), March 10 — For the first time in memory, no kites will flutter in the Lahore sky for the boisterous spring festival known as Basant, which this year falls on Sunday.

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David Guttenfelder/Associated Press

Though Pakistan has banned most flying of kites because some have wires that cause injury, the tradition is alive in Afghanistan, where a competition was held Friday near Kabul.

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They are too dangerous.

Kite flying has long been a passion in this part of the world, for adults as well as children. In Pakistan, people even fly kites at night, using

powerful searchlights. And every year, Basant transforms the skies over Lahore, the capital of Punjab Province, into a glittery spectacle of hundreds of thousands of kites.

But adults and children love to indulge in kite duels, and that is where the danger lies. For duels, the kites are flown on a thin wire or on a thick string coated with glass or chemicals, to better attack opponent's kites.

Stray kites can and do drag their strings unpredictably, tangling around a human neck or limb and cutting it.

The Supreme Court banned kite flying last year, but allowed an exception from Feb. 25 to March 15, a step seen as a nod to the importance of Basant and an attempt to keep kite manufacturers and vendors in business.

During those few weeks, kite fliers and vendors were supposed to promise not to use wire or dangerous string. But kite flying began even before Feb. 25, and a spate of deaths and injuries in the last few weeks persuaded the provincial government to ban the sport on Thursday night, according to government officials.

On Friday, the provincial home secretary, Khusro Pervez, was quoted in state-run media as saying that more than 600 kite fliers had been arrested during the last two weeks for improper string. Chaudhry Pervez Elahi, the chief minister of Punjab, said Friday that the government would fully enforce the new ban and violators would face serious penalties.

"Can we ignore the pain of a family whose sole breadwinner has been killed on the road by flying twine?" Mr. Elahi said. "We can't allow a killer sport to continue at any cost."

The furor over kite flying gained momentum last month when a 3-year-old girl was killed by a kite string. "She used to call herself a little fairy," said Fozia Liaqut, 42, the mother of the girl, Mahnoor.

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On Feb. 19, she was riding in front on a motorbike with her father, mother and two sisters. The bike sped into the path of a coarsened kite string, which must have dipped low with the winds.

"There was so much bleeding that she died before reaching the hospital," Ms. Liaqut said.

Many drivers now bend long rods over their motor bikes, attaching them at the front and back, hoping that any stray kite strings will slide along them and spare their necks.

Since Feb. 25 three more people, including a child, have died, and dozens of people have been injured, according to reports in the Pakistani news media.

Public outcry mounted with every report. Earlier this week, dozens of critics of kite flying and members of the aggrieved families held a protest rally in Lahore. Kites were burned and stomped upon. "Stop the deadly game," posters urged.

Opposition to Basant and kite flying is not limited to those who worry about the injuries. Islamists also vociferously oppose the festival for what they say are its Hindu origins. Clerics in Lahore had planned to stage a big demonstration after Friday Prayer but dropped the idea after the ban was announced.

Proponents of kite flying have questioned why there must be a total ban, urging the government instead to go after those who manufacture illegal string.

"The wisdom of stripping a city of a part of its culture, of denying people a part of life that is immensely important to many, needs to be considered with care," Kamila Hayat, a human rights activist, wrote in a recent op-ed column in The News, the country's most widely read daily.

For opponents, the wisdom is unquestionable.

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"People are dying, and we are celebrating!" said Khawaja Izhar, 75, the chairman of Anti-Kite Flying Democratic Front. "Why allow kite flying for even a brief period?"