Quetta massacre: sectarian violence on the rise in Pakistan

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One of Pakistan's worst sectarian killings in recent times took place in early July in the city of Quetta, capital of the province of Baluchistan, near the country's border with Afghanistan.

Three gunmen burst into the Asna-Ul-Asharia mosque on July 4, opened fire and threw grenades into the crowd of more than 2,000 worshippers gathered for Friday prayers. At least 53 people were killed and many others were wounded. One gunman was shot dead by guards and the other two blew themselves up. The mosque is one of the city's main centres of worship for the Shiite sect.

Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali immediately pointed the finger at India, saying that evidence indicated the "involvement of foreign hands". Others have attempted to blame the Pakistani army or military intelligence.

A leading Shiite cleric, Allama Sajid Navqi, claimed this week that the military establishment had masterminded the attack to create "anarchy and chaos" in the province. Navqi is part of the Islamic fundamentalist alliance—Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)—which holds power in Baluchistan.

But the direct perpetrators of the atrocity appear to have been Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LEJ), an extremist militia connected to the Sunni sect. The LEJ has been responsible for a number of sectarian attacks on Shiites. It was formed in 1996, as the military wing of Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), a group that wants to transform Pakistan into a Sunni theocracy.

A videotape and letter received by BBC correspondents in Quetta on July 15 claimed responsibility. The tape showed three men, said to be LEJ members, one of whom delivered an anti-Shiite diatribe. The letter announced that the LEJ had carried out a string of sectarian attacks, including the one on the Asna-Ul-Asharia mosque and the killing of 12 Shiite police trainees in Quetta on June 8, saying these were protests against the government, President Pervez Musharraf, Iran and the US.

According to the BBC, the three men in the videotape appeared to match photographs of the three men killed in the attack on the mosque. Photographs of their bloodied faces were published in the local press. The police indicated the following day that they had identified two of the three gunmen but were still verifying their connection to the LEJ militia.

The LEJ and other fanatical Sunni groups have a history of sectarian violence in Pakistan. But these tensions have been inflamed by the US military intervention in Afghanistan and the ongoing involvement of FBI and CIA agents in hunting down Islamic extremists in Pakistan.

Many of the country's Shiites come from the distinctive Hazara ethnic group—an impoverished and persecuted minority in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, bitter enmity existed between the Taliban regime and Hazara groups. A brutal massacre of Taliban prisoners in Mazar-e-Sharif in 1997 was followed by murderous reprisals against Hazaras when the Taliban seized the city again the following year.

Several Hazara organisations formed part of the US-backed Northern Alliance that toppled the Taliban regime, which was based mainly among ethnic Pashtun tribes. Ustad Karim Khalil, the leader of Hazara-based Hizb-e-Wahdat Islami, is one of three vice presidents in the Kabul regime installed at the instigation of Washington.

As a result, the groups like the LEJ in Pakistan, which backed the Taliban, lashed out at Shiite Hazaras, accusing them of being US agents. Tensions were further inflamed by the US invasion of Iraq, with Sunni

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extremists accusing Shiite Hazaras of not participating in antiwar protests.

The slaying of innocent people at the Asna-Ul-Asharia mosque provoked widespread disgust across Pakistan. On July 7, several hundred women staged a demonstration in Multan, carrying banners opposing attempts to create “confrontation between the Shias and Sunnis”. Thousands participated in rallies on July 11 around Pakistan, including in Quetta, Peshawar, Islamabad, Lahore and elsewhere, to protest against the killings.

The Pakistan regime exploited the attack and the subsequent violent Shiite protests that erupted in Quetta to send troops to the city. Provincial Governor Abdul Quadir, a retired general appointed by Musharraf, justified the decision by saying: “We thought with limited resources, the police force which we have here, it was probably not possible to control the situation. So we requested civil armed forces and the army to come in.”

But Musharraf, who was in Europe after visiting Washington at the time of the attack, has been keen to strengthen his hand in Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province, where the MMA also controls the provincial administration following last year’s elections. On his return, he blamed the attack on the Asna-Ul-Asharia mosque on “either religious extremists or sectarian terrorists” and promised a further crackdown.

The two border provinces have become bases of operations for anti-US guerrilla groups operating inside Afghanistan, heightening tensions between the two countries. Several clashes have already taken place between Afghan and Pakistani soldiers on the border. Washington is pressing Musharraf to do more to seal the border and to suppress Islamic extremist groups based in Pakistan.

Musharraf has responded by using the sectarian massacre to boost the military presence in Quetta, but such moves are likely to inflame the situation even further.

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