

Missile strike on Pakistani Islamic school slaughters 80

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A devastating pre-dawn missile strike on an Islamic school in Chingai in the remote Bajaur agency of Pakistan has left at least 80 students and teachers dead. The attack, which levelled the buildings and left just a handful of survivors, has provoked angry protests throughout the country.

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf claimed responsibility for the raid, alleging that all of the dead were "militants" undergoing training for attacks on US-led forces across the nearby border with Afghanistan. "Anyone who says that these people were innocent is telling lies," he said.

Local villagers have insisted that children as young as five were among the victims. One of the survivors, Abu Bakar, 22, told the press from his hospital bed in Peshawar that only two other students—aged 15 and 16—were still alive. "There was no militant training in the madrassa," he said. "We had come here to learn God's religion."

The school was run by cleric Maulana Liaquat who was killed in the attack. He was a leader of the Islamist Tanzim Nifaz Shariat Mohammadi (TNSM) and made no secret of his support for anti-US insurgents in Afghanistan. According to various press reports, Liaquat had connections to Ayman al-Zawahiri and other senior Al Qaeda leaders who may have been the prime target of the attack.

However, not one of the allegations against Liaquat and his students has been proven. Even if the claims were true, there was no justification for the indiscriminate slaughter that took place. Yet, in all the international press coverage, there is a complete absence of any criticism. Under the banner of the fraudulent US "war on terror", it is now accepted that military forces have a licence to act as judge, jury and executioner.

More than 15,000 people protested against the attack in Khar, the main town in Bajaur agency, on Tuesday. Angry protesters chanted "Death to Bush! Death to Musharraf!" and "Anyone who is friend of America is a traitor!" The rally adopted a verbal resolution to stone to death anyone caught spying for the Pakistani army or the US government. Smaller rallies took place in the cities of Karachi, Peshawar, Lahore, Multan, Quetta and Islamabad, where participants burned American flags and called for Musharraf's overthrow.

Musharraf and the Pakistani military have gone to great lengths to deny claims that US forces carried out the attack. Locals told the media that unmanned US Predator drones, which are capable of firing missiles, were flying above the village before the attack. "We heard two blasts at about 4.50 am, whereas the Pakistani helicopters appeared a good 10 minutes later," an eyewitness told the BBC.

Pakistani military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan refused to say how much US assistance was involved. "Intelligence sharing was definitely there, but to say they [US forces] have carried out the operation, that is absolutely wrong." Foreign Office spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam went one step further, rejecting any suggestion that Pakistan was responding to foreign pressure. "It has nothing to do with any influence or pressure," she said. "It is something that we have done."

Aslam's remarks are simply absurd. For months, US officials from President Bush down have been demanding that Musharraf take tougher action against anti-US insurgents operating from inside Pakistan. As attacks on NATO forces inside Afghanistan have escalated, the demands for Pakistani action have become more strident. US generals have been particularly critical of a truce struck last month between

the Pakistan government and tribal leaders in the border area of North Waziristan, saying it has boosted the insurgency in Afghanistan.

Musharraf, who backed the US-led occupation of Afghanistan in 2001, has been walking a tightrope. His support for the US “war on terrorism” has generated widespread opposition to his regime, particularly in the border areas where Pashtun tribes have close ties with their counterparts in Afghanistan. He sent 70,000 Pakistani troops into the previously autonomous tribal areas and only signed a truce after the army suffered significant losses in clashes with local militia.

Given the inevitable wave of opposition, it is not at all clear why Musharraf carried out the latest attack, or if indeed he did order it. The government was engaged in negotiations with tribal leaders in Bajaur to reach a deal similar to that struck in North Waziristan. According to locals, some of those killed in Monday’s attack had taken part in talks in previous days. A journalist with NBC News said a formal signing ceremony had been expected on Monday.

The US-based Stratfor thinktank has suggested it is more likely that the attack was carried out by US forces or in a joint US-Pakistani operation. “The notion that Pakistani forces would themselves have carried out the strike does raise an eyebrow. For one thing, Pakistani forces have not attempted targeted strikes against militants in this area in the past. Second, it would be highly unusual for Pakistani forces to carry out such an attack while the government is engaging in high-profile negotiations with leaders in the tribal badlands—hoping they will prevent the area from being used by Islamist militants as a safe haven and launch-point for attacks, especially in Afghanistan.”

The American military has carried out such raids before. In January, US forces used missiles against the nearby village of Damadola, killing 13 people, including women and children. The attack provoked outrage throughout the area forcing Musharraf to insist that the US could not carry out operations inside Pakistani territory. As far as the US military is concerned, the latest atrocity had the added advantage of undermining Musharraf’s efforts to reach peace deals in Bajaur and other border areas.

It is quite possible that Musharraf took responsibility for the attack, rather than admit he had allowed the US to stage operations in Pakistan. Stratfor commented:

“From Musharraf’s standpoint, the notion that Pakistani forces carried out a strike against their fellow citizens is somewhat less damaging than the perception that he has permitted infringements of national sovereignty. The problem, of course, is that the public already harbours both views, to varying degrees—and the strongest card Musharraf has to play in this matter represents only the lesser of two evils.”

Whatever the case may be, the prime responsibility for the latest atrocity rests with the Bush administration. Having created a quagmire in Afghanistan, Washington, whether directly or indirectly, is now carrying its war into Pakistan with unpredictable and potentially explosive consequences for its ally, the Musharraf regime.



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