

Mosque massacre: Washington's "war on terror" shakes Pakistan

Bill Van Auken
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A week-long siege mounted by the Pakistani military against Lal Masjid, or Red Mosque, in Islamabad ended violently Tuesday in bitter fighting that claimed a heavy loss of life. Citing Pakistani military sources, the Dawn News television network reported that 88 civilians and 12 army commandos had been killed by late Tuesday, as the day-long battle continued.

There was no way as of last night, however, to determine the real death toll. Military spokesman Major General Waheed Arshad declined to give a firm casualty figure, stating bluntly, "When the operation is finished we'll start picking up bodies."

It is suspected that many of the victims are young madrassa students, drawn from poor families and from the strife-torn regions of Kashmir and the North West Frontier Province. In the course of the siege, frantic family members gathered on street corners outside the barbed-wire barricades erected by the military, hoping for news of their children and relatives trapped inside.

"He is getting dollars for every student from America, Europe and others," Badshah Rehman, whose two sons were inside the mosque, said of Pakistan's US-backed military dictator Gen. Pervez Musharraf. "He has killed our children for dollars," he told the Reuters news agency, while keeping vigil with other parents.

Islamabad was rocked by a series of explosions and sustained automatic weapons fire beginning in the pre-dawn hours Tuesday. The besieged mosque is located in the center of the city, and the fighting unfolded in close proximity to government buildings and residential neighborhoods where state officials reside. Much of the Pakistani capital was under curfew, and its inhabitants kept off the streets. There were reports of civilians being struck by stray bullets up to a kilometer away from the mosque.

The operation involved several thousand Pakistani troops. According to some accounts, Musharraf personally directed the assault, which was led by an elite commando unit that he had previously commanded. That fighting was still going on more than 17 hours after the assault began was testimony to the tenacity of the resistance.

Pakistani soldiers and police kept the media far away from the mosque and barred access to hospitals in an attempt to control information on casualties, which may prove even more horrific than those reported thus far. Reporters who sought to breach this blockade were threatened with being shot.

Among the confirmed dead at the Lal mosque was its deputy chief Abdul Rasheed Ghazi. Interior Ministry spokesman Brig. Javed Cheema told the Pakistani press that he was found

barricaded in a basement of the mosque compound together with women and children. The brigadier claimed that after militants fired on the troops, "The troops responded and in the crossfire he was killed."

What has happened to the women and children who were with Ghazi is not known, but in a cell phone call from inside the mosque, a man reported that there were "dead bodies everywhere" and that Ghazi's own mother had been killed. The military and the government have routinely referred to women and children in the compound as "human shields," thereby placing the onus for their deaths on the mosque's leaders. The latter, however, have insisted that those remaining in the compound were there voluntarily.

The bloodbath was ordered by Musharraf in an apparent bid to placate Washington's demands for harsher measures against radical Islamist forces and shore up his own crumbling political position within Pakistan.

There is every possibility, however, that the violent assault on the mosque compound and the significant loss of life will further destabilize Pakistan and could well prove only the first battle in a civil war.

Hundreds of armed supporters of those in the besieged mosque blocked the strategic Karakorum Highway in the Himalayas, a key trade route between Pakistan and China. The protesters, many of them local madrassa students, vowed to wage a jihad against Musharraf's regime.

On the eve of the mosque assault Monday, the Bajaur region of the tense North West Frontier Province saw some 20,000 tribesmen, many carrying assault rifles, take to the streets in opposition to the siege, chanting "Death To Musharraf!" and "Death To America!" According to press accounts, the Pakistani regime has dispatched a division comprising some 20,000 troops to the restive region, which borders Afghanistan.

The US-led occupation forces in Afghanistan have conducted missile strikes on targets in the area, leading to mass casualties, and they have been pressing for Islamabad's permission to conduct "hot pursuit" operations across the border into Bajaur and other parts of the northwest. An intensified crisis pitting the Musharraf regime against Islamist forces could well provide the pretext for a major US intervention in Pakistan itself.

A State Department spokesman signaled Washington's approval of the bloodletting. "The government of Pakistan has proceeded in a responsible way," he said "All governments have a responsibility to preserve order."

On the eve of the battle, Washington's ambassador to the United Nations John Negroponte, who visited Islamabad last month, stated in a Voice of America interview, "This is a matter that I think the government and the authorities, including the security officials of the government of Pakistan, must resolve. This is not something for us to say. So, we will respect whatever decisions are made by the government of Pakistan."

Negroponte, the veteran of no small number of US-engineered massacres from Central America to Iraq, was being excessively modest. There can be little doubt that his discussions with Musharraf and other Pakistani officials contained an ultimatum from Washington that they finish the job against the Islamists.

President Bush, speaking in Cleveland Tuesday, gave a ringing endorsement of the massacre in Islamabad. "I like him and I appreciate him," Bush said of the dictator Musharraf, describing him as "a strong ally in the war against these extremists."

That these "extremists" are in large measure the byproduct of policies pursued by Washington in the region, as well as those of its key ally, Pakistan's military regime, is passed over in silence.

Tensions between the mosque and the Musharraf government had become increasingly sharp in recent months as a result of, on the one hand, a government campaign to seize prime real estate supposedly occupied unlawfully by mosques, and, on the other, escalating Islamist demands that Sharia law be imposed in the capital and throughout the country. Students from the Red Mosque compound mounted their own vigilante campaign, attacking stores that sold DVDs and videotapes and, in a widely reported incident last month, abducting a group of Chinese women from a massage parlor.

This episode provoked protests from Beijing as well as the wrath of the Pakistani government, which counts China among its closest trade partners and allies.

But relations were by no means always so poisoned. The mosque's central location, just blocks from the headquarters of the Pakistani military intelligence, the ISI, was no accident. For many years, Lal Masjid was virtually a government-run mosque, enjoying the patronage of successive Pakistani military rulers going back to Ayub Khan more than 40 years ago.

It was under the last military dictator, Zia ul Haq, that the mosque became closely enmeshed in the policies then being pursued by both the Pakistani regime and the US in the region. It served as a significant ideological and material base of support for the CIA-backed mujahideen fighting against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. In return, Zia granted it the exclusive real estate where yesterday's fighting unfolded.

Maulana Abdullah, the Muslim cleric who ran the mosque for decades, was assassinated in 1998. His sons—Abul Aziz, now in police custody, and Abdul Rashid, killed in the assault—took charge of Lal Masjid, maintaining close ties to the successors of the mujahideen, including Afghanistan's Taliban and Al Qaeda—a relationship they shared with the Pakistani regime and the ISI.

Relations between the mosque and Musharraf deteriorated after September 2001, when the Pakistani ruler backed the US invasion of Afghanistan and the toppling of the Taliban. Despite the denunciations of his policies, however, Musharraf treated the Islamists with relative tolerance, seeing them as a counterweight to

opposition from the left.

There is no doubt that the Pakistani dictator made a calculated political decision to end the siege of Lal Masjid with a bloodbath. In the early hours of Tuesday morning, a high-level negotiating team led by Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, a former premier and president of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League, had worked out an agreement for a surrender of the mosque. When the document was presented to Musharraf, however, he revised virtually every item in it, rendering it unworkable. Shortly afterwards, the attack began.

While placating Washington was no doubt a decisive factor in Musharraf's calculations, so too was the deepening political crisis confronting his regime.

The popular upheavals triggered by his summary firing of Pakistan's Chief Justice Chaudhry Iftikhar had led to mounting criticism of his rule and questions over his ability to remain in power, particularly within the US political establishment and media. Now, the bloodletting at Lal Masjid has shifted this political discussion, with Musharraf cast as the key ally in the "war on terror."

There is also growing speculation that he may use the siege and the expected upheavals to follow as the pretext for imposing a new state of emergency, potentially circumventing presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled in the coming months.

Musharraf may seek to pull off such a coup in alliance with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of Benazir Bhutto, which has indicated that it is prepared to make common cause with the military leader in the name of upholding secularism against the Islamists.

The Pakistani daily *Dawn* noted Tuesday that the PPP nearly derailed the adoption of a joint declaration at a multi-party conference held by the Pakistani opposition in London last weekend.

While other parties had urged mass resignations of their members from existing national and provincial legislative assemblies if Musharraf tries to use these bodies to give himself another term without an election, "The PPP—already believed to be in secret negotiations with the government—did not wish to be categorical about its parliamentarians quitting the assemblies, as the other parties apparently seem determined to do if the general-president goes ahead with his plans," according to the newspaper.

Whatever accommodation can be patched together between the rival factions of the Pakistani elite, the Lal Masjid massacre is one more indication of the deep instability of all of the country's political institutions and the mounting threat that Washington's key "ally in the war on terror" will be plunged into a revolutionary crisis.



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