

Marriott Hotel bombing: another sign of Pakistan's deepening crisis

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22 September 2008

The massive bomb blast that devastated the luxury Marriott Hotel in Islamabad on Saturday evening is one more sign of the deepening political crisis in Pakistan produced by the Bush administration's spreading "war on terrorism". While no one has claimed responsibility, the blast was undoubtedly in retaliation for continuing attacks by the US and Pakistani military in the country's border region with Afghanistan against Islamist militias.

Investigators have recovered a videotape showing a dump truck exploding after being stopped at the hotel's security gates. The blast from an estimated half tonne of explosives left a huge crater some 20 metres wide and 8 metres deep and sparked a fire that rapidly engulfed the hotel and took 12 hours to bring under control. At least 53 people were killed and more than 250 injured. Among the dead were the Czech ambassador Ivo Zdarek, a Vietnamese woman and two unnamed US Defence Department officials.

The bombing was clearly aimed at sending a message to the Pakistani government. The Marriott Hotel is in the political centre of Islamabad, near the parliament building, the prime minister's residence, presidential offices and foreign embassies. As one of the capital's two five-star hotels, it was frequented by top foreign visitors and government officials as well as the capital's business elite. Senior Interior Ministry official Rehman Malik immediately declared that "all roads lead to FATA"—the Federally Administered Tribal Areas where the Pakistani military is currently waging a major offensive against militias supportive of anti-occupation insurgents in neighbouring Afghanistan.

The blast came just hours after Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari addressed a joint session of the country's parliament pledging to free Pakistan from "the shackles of terrorism". Since taking office earlier this month, Zardari has been engaged in a delicate balancing act—on the one hand, bowing to US demands for a crackdown on Islamist militants in the FATA, and, on the other, attempting to placate popular anger over what is seen as a proxy war on behalf of the US.

Shahid Kamal, for instance, told the *New York Times* that

he was sick of the wave of bombings in the country. "This is a reaction to what is going on in FATA," he said. "We have been implementing a reckless and careless policy for a number of years. What's happening in FATA is that Pakistanis are killing Pakistanis."

Anti-American hostility has grown following a marked escalation of US attacks inside Pakistani territory this month, including the first publicly acknowledged ground operation by US Special Forces on September 3. The raid, which killed at least 20 civilians, provoked a sharp reaction from Pakistani army General Ashfaq Kayani who warned that further incursions would be resisted. Following reports of Pakistani troops firing on US soldiers attempting a second cross border raid, US Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen made a sudden visit to Islamabad last week to patch up relations.

Acutely sensitive to opposition inside the Pakistani military and the broader public to the US attacks, Zardari told parliament on Saturday: "We will not tolerate the violation of our sovereignty and territorial integrity by any power in the name of combatting terrorism". The statement was one of the few moments in a lengthy, vague address that prompted universal applause, with legislators thumping their desks to show their approval. Zardari is well aware that he cannot afford to be branded as a puppet for Washington, like his predecessor—the military strongman General Pervez Musharraf.

Zardari, however, appears to be playing a double game—publicly posturing as a defender of Pakistani sovereignty, while privately accommodating to US demands for a stepped-up war in the FATA region. Following the Marriott Hotel bombing, Interior Ministry official Rehman Malik emphatically rejected a US offer to send FBI agents to assist in the investigation, saying: "We don't need help; we reject it". At the same time, however, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the Pakistani government and military quietly reassured Admiral Mullen last week that delayed plans for sending dozens of US military advisors to Pakistan to provide counterinsurgency training would go ahead.

Moreover, while Mullen was in Islamabad, another missile fired from an unmanned US drone slammed into an alleged militant training camp in the village of Bagh in South Waziristan killing at least six people. So far this month, the US military or CIA have launched six missile strikes on Pakistani territory—compared to just three for all of 2007. While Pakistani Defence Minister Ahmad Mukhtar declared his “surprise” at the strike, local intelligence officials told *Time* magazine that the missile attack was the product of improved “US-Pakistani intelligence sharing”.

The Pakistani military is already engaged in a largely unreported brutal war in the border tribal region to stamp out militant groups operating under the umbrella of Tehrik Taleban Pakistan or so-called Pakistani Taliban. Some 120,000 Pakistani troops, including a 60,000-strong locally raised frontier corps, are stationed in the FATA region. A major offensive is currently underway in the Bajaur area where clashes are taking place daily and an estimated 300,000 people have fled their homes.

Military spokesman Major Murad Khan told *Bloomberg.com* last Thursday that at least 19 gunmen had been killed in a fierce battle the previous day. “The militants’ headquarters and fortified positions around Loe Sam have been engaged with artillery and helicopter attacks,” he said. Pakistani security forces claim to have killed more than 700 fighters since the operation began six weeks ago. Associated Press of Pakistan has reported that the military has used warplanes and helicopter gunships in its attacks. While no figures for civilian casualties have been released, the toll has undoubtedly been high, given the indiscriminate use of such firepower.

The *Dawn* newspaper warned on Saturday: “The battle in the Bajaur Agency has not only become a tipping-point for Pakistan’s internal security, it can also have a deep impact on the country’s status as a key US ally in the war against terrorism.” After noting that officials felt the offensive was going well, it commented: “However, there are concerns that rising numbers of civilian casualties in a lengthening conflict may cause [a] public and political backlash, and undermine the national support needed to succeed in Bajaur... For now, government and security officials are staying put and are determined to take the battle to what they call ‘its logical conclusion’.”

These vicious counterinsurgency operations conducted in collaboration with US and NATO forces over the border in Afghanistan are certain to provoke continued resistance in the FATA region and opposition among Pakistanis as a whole. Opinion polls have repeatedly found that the overwhelming majority of the population is opposed to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan and the war in the border areas. Much of the FATA region is now controlled by

various Islamist and tribal militias that have had no difficulty finding recruits for the anti-occupation insurgency in Afghanistan.

The war also threatens to open up divisions in the Pakistani military which played a major role in supporting the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the 1990s before Islamabad was forced to sever relations by the Bush administration after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Significant numbers of the Pakistani army, including its officer corps, are ethnic Pashtuns and are hostile to waging a war on the largely Pashtun population in the tribal areas.

President Zardari’s fragile position is being further undermined by the country’s economic problems. Foreign currency reserves have plummeted in the past three months due to the high cost of oil and other imports. The growth rate has been revised down. The inflation rate has now reached 25 percent and unemployment is rising. Frequent power shortages continue to hit industrial and agricultural production. An IMF mission is currently in Pakistan and due to issue its report this week, which will undoubtedly push for more austerity measures in return for any further aid.

The Marriott Hotel bombing is just one symptom of the worsening political and social crisis confronting the Pakistani government. President Zardari, despite his rhetoric about restoring democracy in Pakistan, has retained all of the sweeping powers inserted into the constitution by the military strongman, General Musharraf. In his address to parliament on Saturday, Zardari was deliberately vague about the issue, saying only that a parliamentary committee would “revisit” the president’s powers. The obvious conclusion is that Zardari, like Musharraf, needs these autocratic powers on the books in order to deal with the opposition that is rapidly emerging to his rule.



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