

Pakistan rounds up suspects in Mumbai attacks

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Under intense pressure from the US and India, the Pakistani government has initiated a crackdown on Islamist groups allegedly involved in the terrorist attacks on Mumbai. The first arrests were made in a raid on a religious school and residential buildings near Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan controlled-Kashmir, on Sunday night.

Pakistani Defence Minister Ahmed Mukhtar told Indian television CBN-IBN on Tuesday that Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) leader Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi had been arrested along with others. Indian police have accused Lakhvi of being the operational commander behind the Mumbai atrocity that left more than 170 people dead.

The minister announced that Maulana Masood Azhar, leader of Jaish-e-Muhammad, another Islamist militia active in Kashmir, had been placed under house arrest. The *Wall Street Journal* reported yesterday that Pakistan security forces had arrested 40 more from LeT and other groups in continuing raids.

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari reportedly rang US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Monday to inform her of the news. Rice and US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Michael Mullen were in Islamabad last week to demand that the government provide "unequivocal assistance" to India in tracking down the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks.

Pakistan, however, has stopped short of meeting New Delhi's demand to hand over a list of Pakistani suspects for prosecution in India. Foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi told the media: "We will proceed against those arrested under Pakistani laws."

Indian police claim to have extracted details of the Mumbai attack from the sole surviving gunman, Ajmal Amir Kasab, as well as from intercepted communications. Kasab

allegedly admitted to being an LeT member, to having trained in Pakistan and to arriving with nine others by boat from Karachi. He reportedly identified Lakhvi as the chief organiser. None of the details has been publicly verified.

Both Washington and New Delhi have reacted to the Pakistani arrests with scepticism, insisting that more must be done. US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack described the detentions as "good and important steps" but insisted that it was "incumbent upon the Pakistani government to act to prevent any future terrorist attacks".

The *New York Times* cited senior US officials as declaring that there was no independent evidence of Lakhvi's capture or that the arrested men were LeT members. One official said: "In the past when they have promised to move against these guys, they would pick one or two of them and then several months later they would release them."

While India is seeking the suppression of Kashmiri separatists opposed to Indian rule in Jammu and Kashmir, the US is pressing Pakistan for further action against anti-US insurgents opposed to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. Speaking about the Mumbai attacks yesterday at the West Point military academy, President Bush declared: "The problem [of terrorism] is most pronounced in Pakistan, where areas along the Afghanistan border are home to Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters."

The reaction in New Delhi to Pakistan's arrests was even more dismissive. A government official told the IANS: "It's too early to react. We have seen this kind of reaction [in Pakistan] in the past." He branded Islamabad's actions as "mere statements and tokenism," adding: "At this stage, nobody is interested in tokenism."

Minister of State Prithviraj Chavan told reporters in Jammu yesterday: "The Indian government is not satisfied with the steps taken by Pakistan to deal with terrorism so far.

We want terrorist activities like running training camps to be shut down in Pakistan and will pressurise Islamabad to deport criminals who were involved in terrorist activities on our soil."

Indian authorities in Mumbai yesterday released the photographs and names of 8 of the 9 gunmen killed in the three-day siege of the city. They claimed that all the men came from Pakistan and were part of a large group who received military training. Raising fears of further attacks, Mumbai police deputy Devan Bharti said: "This is a worry for all parts of the world. These men could strike in any one of several countries."

The Indian government has gone to great lengths to insist that the Mumbai attacks were purely Pakistani in origin. Indian police, however, are questioning two men already in detention with alleged links to LeT—Sabuddin Ahmed, who allegedly assisted a Pakistani operative to enter India, and Faheem Ansari, who was detained in February. Ansari apparently had a map of key targets in south Mumbai, raising questions as to why the information was not acted on.

Indian police detained two more men last Friday—Mukhtar Ahmed Sheikh in New Delhi and Tauseef Rehman in Calcutta, who allegedly supplied SIM cards for the mobile phones used by the Mumbai attackers. Rehman supposedly bought the SIM cards from different shops in Calcutta using fake IDs, while Ahmed was involved in selling them in Jammu and Kashmir.

These arrests, particularly that of Ahmed who was apparently an undercover police agent, raise many unanswered questions. As the British-based *Times* noted, the investigation "turned sour after police in Srinagar, Indian Kashmir's summer capital, said that Ahmed worked for them, raising the possibility that an Indian agent aided the militants that committed India's worse terror attack in 15 years."

The *Washington Post* explained: "The potential involvement of Indians complicates India's initial assertion that the Mumbai attacks were carried out solely by Pakistani nationals". The arrests pose questions about the oppressive and impoverished conditions facing many of India's substantial Muslim minority, including in the disputed region of Kashmir.

New Delhi, however, is continuing to intensify the pressure on Pakistan. India has formally requested that the UN Security Council list Jamaat-ud-Dawa as a terrorist

organisation. Jamaat-ud-Dawa, a religious charity, was reportedly established as a front following the banning of the LeT in Pakistan in 2002. Pakistan has indicated that it will support the measure.

Highlighting continuing sharp tensions between India and Pakistan, CNN-IBN reported yesterday that the Indian Air Force had raised its level of readiness to "Passive Air Defence". All Indian warplanes have been armed with bombs and missiles ready for take off within minutes. Indian warships were aggressively patrolling the Arabian Sea, the report stated.

The Pakistani armed forces have responded in kind, with the navy and air force on a state of high alert. While both sides appear to be playing down the military preparations, foreign minister Qureshi pointedly warned: "We don't want a war, but if it's forced on us, we are fully prepared to defend ourselves."

Indian defence ministry spokesman Sitanshu Kar declared that it was "normal for the armed forces to remain on alert even in normal times." The times are far from normal, however. Over the past two weeks, there have been frequent comments in the Indian media calling for the military to make pre-emptive strikes against alleged terrorist training camps inside Pakistan.

India and Pakistan have already fought three wars since the partition of Indian sub-continent in 1947. The political establishments in both countries have relied on whipping up communalism and chauvinism as a means of diverting attention from their inability to meet the social needs and democratic aspirations of the masses. In the midst of a deepening global economic crisis, the danger of another confrontation between the two nuclear-armed powers cannot be ruled out.



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