

Pakistan: Terrorist attack targets international cricket match

Keith Jones
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Eight people were killed and more than a dozen injured when unidentified terrorists mounted a commando-style raid Tuesday morning on a convoy of vehicles carrying players and umpires to a Pakistani-Sri Lankan cricket match in Lahore.

According to news reports, a dozen or more young men, armed with assault rifles, grenades and a rocket launcher, ambushed from three sides the bus conveying the Sri Lankan cricket team as it reached a major intersection in the heart of Pakistan's second largest city.

The policemen who were escorting the bus returned fire and a battle ensued, which according to some reports lasted as long as 25 minutes. Six police officers, the driver of the bus transporting the umpires, and another civilian were killed. At least five players on the Sri Lankan national cricket team, an assistant coach of the Sri Lankan team, and an umpire were injured, as were six policemen.

All the attackers escaped. Many hours later Pakistani authorities announced that they had arrested four persons in connection with Tuesday's events, but provided no information as to whether any of the four had participated in the attack or how they were otherwise involved.

No group has thus far claimed responsibility for Tuesday's commando attack, which could easily have resulted in double or treble the fatalities. It was clearly aimed at attracting maximum international exposure—cricket is far and away South Asia's most high-profile and popular sport—and at demonstrating the inability of Pakistani authorities to secure even the country's major cities.

Over the past year and a half there have been repeated terror attacks in Pakistan's biggest cities. None of the orchestrators of these attacks have been conclusively identified, let alone arrested and convicted. Early on the morning of October 19, 2007, bombs ripped through the cavalcade of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Life Chairperson Benazir Bhutto as it travelled through Karachi killing more than 135 people. Two months later Bhutto was assassinated and 20 others killed in a bombing and shooting in the heart of Rawalpindi, the heavily policed city that is the headquarters of Pakistan's military. And last September, 54 people were killed when the most prestigious hotel in Pakistan's capital, Islamabad, was bombed.

Tuesday's events have resulted in a new round of official recrimination and finger-pointing, as various state actors and parties in Pakistan and its decades-old rival, India, seek to manipulate popular anger and fear over the latest atrocity.

Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, a close associate of Pakistani President and PPP Chairman Asif Ali Zardari, said that Tuesday's attack was akin to that mounted in Mumbai, India in late November and suggested it was authored by like elements.

"These were the same methods and the same sort of people as hit Mumbai," Taseer told reporters.

Under heavy pressure from Washington and New Delhi, Pakistan's government last month conceded that the Mumbai attack, which resulted in 163 deaths, was partly organized from Pakistan and involved elements in the leadership of Lashkar-e-Taibi (LeT), an Islamacist militia that long enjoyed close ties with Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus. Even before this, Pakistani authorities had shut down some LeT facilities and taken much of its leadership into custody.

Zardari and Pakistan's PPP-led government have invoked the threat of Islamacist terrorism and the growing power of pro-Taliban groups in Pakistan's border regions to justify Islamabad's continuing strong support for the US occupation of Afghanistan and the perpetuation of the decades-long alliance between the Pentagon and the Pakistani military. This alliance has been a vital pillar of a succession of right-wing military dictatorships in Islamabad.

Other elements in the Pakistani government are charging that India was at the root of yesterday's attack.

"The evidence which we have got shows that these terrorists entered from across the border from India," Sardar Nabil Ahmed Gabol, the Pakistani minister of state for shipping and a PPP legislator, told Geo Television. "This was a conspiracy to defame Pakistan internationally." Claiming the attack was in retaliation for the Mumbai raid, Gabol termed it "a declaration of open war on Pakistan by India."

Lahore Commissioner Khushro Pervaiz said Indian involvement in the attack could not be ruled out and Pakistan's Interior Minister Rehman Malik talked of the possible involvement of a "foreign hand." Qazi Hussain, the head of Pakistan's largest Islamic fundamentalist party, the Jamat-i-

Islami, accused Indian intelligence agencies of being behind the attack.

Indian political leaders, meanwhile, have seized on the Lahore attack to step up their campaign to portray Pakistan as the hub of international terrorism. This campaign has the double objective of forcing Pakistan to end all its support for the insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir and ensuring that Washington's dependence on Pakistani logistical and military support in the Afghan war does not result in a weakening of the purported Indo-US "global, strategic partnership."

Within hours of the Lahore attack, Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee appeared before reporters to demand that "the terrorism infrastructure facilities in Pakistan ... be completely dismantled." Home Minister P. Chidambaram chastised Pakistan authorities for a massive security failure.

Mukherjee and Chidambaram have repeatedly suggested that India might have to resort to military action to take out "terrorist bases" in Pakistan.

The spokesman for the Congress Party, the dominant partner in India's United Progressive Alliance government, made highly provocative remarks. Manish Tewari said the Lahore attack was "the result of the policies which Pakistan has followed from 1979 to 2009," conveniently ignoring that it was the US that instigated the Pakistani state to sponsor Islamic fundamentalist militias as part of its efforts to destabilize the Soviet Union.

"If there is something that is happening in Pakistan," said Tewari, "it is only Pakistan that is responsible."

India's bellicose Hindu right has long hoped and pressed for Pakistan to be labeled a "terrorist state." While Tewari did not make this demand, he verged on it: "Pakistan is a nuclear weapons state. The manner in which it is transcending from being a failed state to the Somalia of South Asia needs to worry the international community.... Pakistan is becoming a time-bomb."

The Indian elite has long sought to portray the Kashmir insurgency and the more recent phenomenon of Islamicist terrorism in India as simply and solely a product of Pakistani interference and malevolence. In reality both have long indigenous roots, stretching back to the reactionary communal partition of South Asia in 1947. Their rise, moreover, can only be understood within the context of the Indian elite's increasingly explicit Hindu chauvinism and shameful connivance in anti-minority pogroms.

With national elections to be held in India in five stages from April 16 through May 13, the Congress Party is keen to counter the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party's reactionary and communal-laden claims that it is "soft" on terrorism. It intends to do this by showing that it can put Pakistan in "its place" and is not squeamish about running roughshod over basic civil liberties to "defeat terrorism."

Although the Sri Lankan cricket team was the terrorists' ostensible target, the response of the Sri Lankan government to

yesterday's events has thus far been relatively low key. While some news outlets suggested that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) might have been behind the attack, Colombo has made no such charge.

Over the past year the Sri Lankan government discarded any pretense that it was seeking a negotiated settlement to the island's 25-year-old civil war and mounted a punishing war of annihilation against the LTTE, a war that it now claims is effectively over.

The Lahore bombing can only further destabilize a Pakistani government and state apparatus that is beset by crisis and riven by division.

The Obama administration is demanding that Pakistan greatly intensify its efforts to stamp out all support for the pro-Taliban, anti-US insurgency in the traditionally autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Agency (FATA). Yet the brutal methods the military has employed have already alienated much of the local populace and the Pakistani people greatly resent Washington's use of Pakistan as a tool of its predatory foreign policy and its patronage of the Pakistani military.

Pakistan has been forced to make a further request for IMF assistance, significantly above and beyond the \$7.6 billion package of loans negotiated.

Last week, the long-simmering rivalry between the PPP and the country's second largest party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) [PML (N)], came to a boil when Zardari and the PPP seized on a patently anti-democratic court decision to oust the PML (N) government in Pakistan's largest province, the Punjab. (See "Pakistan rocked by protests after opposition leaders stripped of political rights")

Zardari and the PPP-led government have vowed to prevent lawyers from staging a sit-in outside the country's parliament later this month to protest the government's failure to restore to the judicial bench the judges that the former Bush-backed dictator General Pervez Musharraf purged.

At the beginning of this week, President Zardari issued an executive order establishing mobile courts to issue quick "justice." This order is widely seen as a preparation to use mass jailings to crush anti-government protests, including the lawyers' movement. Critics note that the last time such a judicial regime was imposed was in 1919, when British colonial authorities were attempting to crush mass popular resistance in Lahore.



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