

Bomb blasts kill over 120 in Pakistan

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More than 120 people were killed in bomb blasts in Pakistan on Thursday. The biggest death toll resulted from a co-ordinated double bombing that targeted the country's Shiite minority in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan. It left at least 90 dead and injured more than 100.

A suicide bomber targeted a Quetta billiard hall on Thursday evening, killing 10 people. Then, 20 minutes later a car bomb tore through the crowd of relatives, rescue workers, police and journalists who had gathered at the site. The Sunni extremist group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, which is notorious for its violent sectarian attacks on Shiites, has claimed responsibility for the double bombing.

On the same day, a separate bomb blast at a Sunni religious gathering in Mingora in the northern Swat Valley killed another 22 people and injured more than 80. No group has claimed responsibility.

Earlier on Thursday, a bomb planted under a security force vehicle in a crowded part of Quetta, left 11 people dead and dozens wounded. The latter blast has been attributed to the United Baloch Army, one of several armed Balochi separatist militias operating in the province.

It is no accident that Quetta was at the centre of Thursday's violence. The city is a cauldron of ethnic and sectarian animosities that have been cultivated and manipulated by sections of the Pakistani ruling elites over decades. These tensions have been greatly exacerbated by US intrigues and interventions going back to Washington's organising and arming of the Islamist jihadists who in the 1980s fought against the Soviet-backed regime in neighbouring Afghanistan. This situation has only been compounded by the US occupation of Afghanistan over the past decade.

Thursday's twin bomb blast was aimed against the city's sizable ethnic Hazara population, many of whom have fled from the on-going war in Afghanistan. They

have been particularly targeted by Sunni Islamists because of their Shiite religion and their distinct ethnic features, and accused of being both spies for the US military and agents for the Shiite fundamentalist regime in next-door Iran.

Hazara leaders organised protests of several thousand people in Quetta yesterday criticising the government and demanding the army be sent in to protect their community. The Hazara Democratic Party (HRD) called on the military to carry out "targeted operations" against the militias attacking Shia Muslims.

The security forces, however, already have a heavy presence in Quetta and throughout Balochistan where they have been engaged in long-running operations against Balochi separatist groups and are notorious for their brutal methods, including "disappearances" and extra-judicial killings. Sections of the Pakistani military have connections to Sunni extremist groups, including the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and have encouraged sectarian violence against Shiites as a means of diverting attention from their own crimes.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi was established in the 1990s as a breakaway from Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). The SSP was formed in reaction to the supposed Shiite "threat" posed by the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In the 1980s, the SSP was nurtured by the US-backed military dictator Zia-ul-Haq along with other Pakistani Sunni militias as part of his "Islamisation" of the country. These groups were used by Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus not only in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, but in mounting attacks inside Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir. Despite being illegal, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi reportedly operates several training camps inside Balochistan.

Top Pakistani government and opposition leaders, including President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf, have issued condemnations of the Quetta blasts. In a bid to dissipate local anger,

Balochistan's chief minister Nawab Aslam Raisani, also from the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP), has called for three days of mourning. The token character of these moves is underlined by the response of Raisani to the killing of 40 Hazaras in 2011 in his hometown of Mastung, which he contemptuously declared was "no big deal."

Sectarian violence increased markedly in Pakistan in 2012, with the minority Shiites being a particular target. According to the US-based Human Rights Watch, more than 400 Shiite Muslims were killed in Pakistan last year and of those, 120 were from Balochistan.

No section of the venal Pakistani bourgeoisie has any progressive solution to the worsening ethnic and sectarian turmoil in Balochistan or in any other part of the country. Rival factions of the ruling class have long exploited such conflicts as a means of dividing workers and the rural masses amid endemic poverty and economic backwardness.

It is no accident that sectarian violence is on the rise as the country's economic and social crisis is worsening. The growth rate is just 3 percent, foreign and local investment has slumped, production and daily life are severely disrupted by electricity shortages, and living standards have been squeezed by years of double-digit inflation. The IMF is pressing for further austerity measures to rein in the budget deficit, which will only exacerbate the already appalling living conditions confronting tens of millions of Pakistanis.

The tensions in Quetta, which is close to the Afghan border, are being further exacerbated by the Obama administration's AfPak war. Although the city has not so far been targeted by the US, drone strikes take place on a routine basis in the nearby Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The number has dramatically increased since the beginning of the year with seven in the past 10 days, the latest killing five people in North Waziristan on Thursday.

The US has a direct interest in Balochistan. The Pakistani province is strategically located next to Iran where the US and Israeli have already been carrying out a covert campaign of sabotage and assassination directed against the country's nuclear programs. It is also home to one of the key supply routes used by NATO forces through Pakistan to Afghanistan. Washington has expressed concern over China's

involvement in building Balochistan's first modern port facilities at Gwadar.

More broadly, the Obama administration is deliberately encouraging Sunni extremist groups throughout the region as it tacitly backs Al Qaeda-linked fighters in its proxy war inside Syria to oust the regime of Bashar al-Assad and targets Iran for military intervention. Funding and arms for the Syrian militias have come from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states—all US allies.

Saudi Arabia has long regarded Iran as its chief regional rival and helped fund anti-Soviet militias inside Afghanistan in the 1980s. Saudi support for Sunni extremists in Pakistan including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi continues. In response, Iran reportedly backs armed Shiite groups inside Balochistan in particular.

Samina Ahmed, South Asia project director for the Brussels-based International Crisis Group, commented to the *Financial Times*: "In the past, there has been a proxy war between the Saudis and the Iranians in Pakistan. Are we going to see that proxy war once again being notched up?"

The US may be more directly involved. In the course of the furore surrounding the arrest of CIA operative Raymond Davis in early 2011 over his shooting of two motorcyclists in Lahore, it was revealed that he had contact with elements of Tehreek-e-Taliban or the Pakistani Taliban, and also Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Washington, of course, has denied any and all links.



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