

Pakistan's largest airport attacked by Taliban group

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Jinnah International Airport in Pakistan's southern port city of Karachi was raided by an Islamist insurgent group late Sunday night. The fighting continued until Monday, causing a suspension of all operations at the airport, which is used by about 44,000 passengers daily. At least 37 people died, including 10 attackers, according to official accounts.

On Tuesday, a security encampment close to the airport came under fire, again forcing the suspension of flights. A military spokesman said the attack was repulsed but the gunmen escaped.

In the Sunday assault, Islamists wearing security force uniforms and using forged identity cards gained access to a terminal used by private aircraft. Passengers boarding or disembarking from several flights were trapped in the fighting. A Boeing 777 with all its passengers and the crew remained in the middle of a runway for about two hours before being taken to safety. According to the government, no passengers were among the dead.

The Islamist group Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which operates from the northwestern tribal belt that borders Afghanistan, claimed responsibility for both attacks. The TTP is a grouping of Pakistani Islamic fundamentalist organisations connected to the Taliban in Afghanistan.

TTP spokesman Shahidullah Shahid said Sunday's assault "is a message to the Pakistan government that we are still alive to react over the killings of innocent people in bomb attacks on their villages."

The immediate reason for the attacks is the Pakistan military's continuation of air raids in the tribal region, especially the North Waziristan agency. The air attacks have escalated despite publicly announced peace negotiations with the TTP. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's so-called "peace talks" began in March, but

have reportedly failed to achieve anything.

While the military declared support for the peace talks, it compelled the Sharif government to approve air strikes on the border area, a move calculated to sabotage the negotiations.

Fighting escalated from April to May. During the last week of May, the military launched a major coordinated offensive, involving air, heavy artillery, tank and ground force attacks, killing at least 75 "suspected militants"—the term the military uses to describe all of its victims. Though independent reports are rare, it seems that villages and towns have been targeted indiscriminately, with high civilian casualties. Nearly 60,000 people have fled the area.

The air raids are continuing. Yesterday, the military told the media that 25 "suspected militants" were killed in the Khyber area's Tirah valley. F-16 fighter jets bombed the area and the military claimed it destroyed nine "militant camps."

Sharif chaired a meeting yesterday with security chiefs, including Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif, to "discuss internal security." No details were released about what was planned apart from a decision to intensify security operations.

The Pakistani parliament passed a resolution condemning the airport attacks but saying nothing about the fragile talks with the Taliban, which are now hanging in the balance, creating a political crisis for Sharif's government.

The United States condemned Sunday's attack and declared that it stood with Pakistan's "efforts to counter terrorism," indicating backing for the military offensive. Washington has demanded that successive Pakistani governments target militant groups based in North Waziristan.

When Sharif announced talks with the Taliban, in line

with his election pledges, Washington claimed it was an “internal matter” for Pakistan, but signalled disagreement with the decision.

Reflecting this position, the *New York Times* reported on Monday: “For Pakistan’s leaders, who for months have been wavering between talking and fighting, the Taliban’s [TTP] robustness is likely to inform their next step.” The article referred to a “possible military response to the Karachi attack.”

Washington has pushed Pakistan into the blind alley of civil war. The TTP groups opposed the occupation of Afghanistan by US-led NATO forces in 2001. However, their roots go back to the CIA-backed mujahideen that were nurtured by Pakistan’s ISI intelligence agency in operations against the previous Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. Since 2001, as Washington drove the Pakistani military to crush internal opposition and help maintain the US-backed regime in Afghanistan, the fighting has spread across Pakistan.

The Obama administration further fuelled the tensions by extending the war in Afghanistan into Pakistan. The US escalated drone attacks in the tribal areas, especially North Waziristan, killing thousands of civilians, including women and children. It also launched cross-border attacks.

Sectarian strife has resulted, with the latest violence claiming 30 Shia pilgrims in a suicide attack in Balochistan on Sunday.

Soon after his election, Sharif pledged support for the US “war on terrorism,” which has served as a vehicle for asserting American hegemony over the region. However, his election promises of negotiations with the TTP reflected concerns within the Pakistani elite about the conflict’s damage to the crisis-ridden economy. The TTP’s apparent ability to target positions in major cities and industrial centres is undermining his government’s agenda to attract foreign investment.

Sharif also attempted to leverage the negotiations with the TTP as means of countering the military’s domination. The military has ruled Pakistan for half of its existence and continues to hold sway over foreign and security policy, regardless of who is in office in Islamabad.

Sharif has had a particularly tense relationship with the military since his ouster via a coup in 1999. Commenting on the latest developments, Reuters

stated: “[T]he army effectively declared it would override a crucial plank of the government’s strategy [negotiations with the TTP] and take matters into its own hands.”

The intensifying crisis in Pakistan is inseparably bound up with the escalating geo-political tensions in the region produced by Washington’s drive for dominance over the resource-rich Central Asian landmass, which is accompanied by its “pivot” to Asia to encircle China economically and militarily.



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