

Pakistan escalates war offensive after school attack

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The terrorist attack on Army Public School and College in Peshawar that killed 132 children, most of them teenagers, and 25 others, including the seven attackers from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has become a *casus belli* for the government to intensify its military offensive in North Waziristan and Khyber tribal agencies and to unleash further attacks on democratic rights.

The TTP has defended last Tuesday's attack as retaliation for the military's own atrocities in its six-month long offensive in the Pashtun tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. These include the killing of women and children in indiscriminate bombing and shelling. The TTP is threatening attacks on "all the organizations associated with security forces" unless the government calls an immediate halt to its offensive in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

However, the government, supported by the entire political establishment, is vowing to intensify and expand the war, which is being waged at the behest of the Obama administration and in close collaboration with the Pentagon and the CIA, which view it as a critical component of the US's Afghan War.

Seeking to exploit the popular shock and anger over the TTP's targeting of innocent children, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif immediately vowed revenge. "We will take account of each and every drop of our children's blood," he announced from Peshawar within hours of last Tuesday's attack.

Military jets have repeatedly attacked Khyber, including at least 20 times in the first 48 hours after the Peshawar attack. The military has also launched attacks against TTP militants in predominantly Pashtun-speaking parts of Balochistan. By the weekend, Pakistani authorities were boasting that their airstrikes and ground attacks had killed at least 57 Islamacist militants. Meanwhile, a US drone missile strike on Saturday killed six in North Waziristan. As a rule, the Pakistani military terms anyone killed in its military operations or by a drone strike, a "terrorist."

The government has also rushed to restore the death penalty. Hours after the attack, Sharif voided a moratorium on executions that was put in place in 2008 so that Pakistan's exports could be eligible for preferential treatment under the European Union's "Preference Plus" tariff-policy for lesser

developed countries.

Army chief General Raheel Sharif immediately signed death warrants for six reputed Islamacist terrorists who had been convicted by military courts. Two of these were hanged on Friday, the four others on Sunday. Of the six, five had been convicted for their role in the 2003 attempted assassination of Pakistan's then military-dictator president, General Pervez Musharraf. The sixth was a member of the military turned Islamacist militant who participated in a 2009 attack on army headquarters. In making these six the first to be executed, the military was sending a blunt message that those who target it will be eliminated without mercy.

Punjab's provincial government has announced it is preparing a list of 80 people to be hanged in coming weeks. According to press reports, at least 8,000 people are currently on death-row. This includes both persons convicted of terrorism offenses and those found guilty of other crimes.

Top governmental figures are demanding the country's anti-terrorism laws be further strengthened. Demanding complete surrender of Islamic militant groups, President Mamnoon Hussain said, "Terrorists should accept the writ of the state or be ready to face dire consequences." Sharif's national security and foreign affairs adviser Sartaj Aziz declared that the attack was Pakistan's "9/11." "Just like 9/11 changed the US and the world forever, this 16/12 is kind of our mini 9/11," he declared Friday.

That very day, Defence Minister Khwaja Asif announced military courts would be established to swiftly hear cases related to terrorism, resurrecting a thoroughly anti-democratic mechanism that Pakistan's ruling elite has frequently resorted to in times of crisis and which is associated with gross and systematic human rights violations.

Already last June, just days after the launching of its Waziristan offensive, the parliamentary opposition joined with the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)-led government to give the army new "anti-terrorism" powers, as well as legal immunity when exercising these powers. The new powers include the right to detain suspects without trial for up to 60 days, conduct warrantless searches, and shoot terrorist suspects "on sight."

The Pakistan elite's "war on terrorism" is a reactionary fraud

just like that mounted by its paymasters in Washington. Islamacist militancy arose in Afghanistan and Pakistan only as a result of the predatory actions of US imperialism and its Pakistani satraps. It was Washington, working through Pakistan's military Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), that financed, armed, and trained the Afghan mujahedeen from which the Taliban arose as part of a renewed Cold War offensive against the Soviet Union. Simultaneously and with the full backing of the US, the then military dictator of Pakistan, Zia-ul-Haq, mounted an "Islamization" drive, whipping up Islamic reaction as a means of intimidating and dividing the working class.

Subsequently, Washington used the 9/11 attacks to provide it with a pretext to invade Afghanistan and obtain a strategic foothold in Central Asia, a region that is not only oil-rich but proximate to three states it views as major strategic adversaries—China, Russia, and Iran. The Pakistani elite quickly fell into line with Washington's demand that Pakistan serve as the staging area for the invasion of Afghanistan and the ensuing neo-colonial counter-insurgency war. At Washington's command, Musharraf in 2004 extended the war to Pakistan, launching a brutal invasion of the traditionally autonomous tribal areas so as to undercut the growing resistance to the puppet regime the US had established in Kabul. It was this invasion of FATA that led to the emergence of the TTP, which is closely aligned, but nonetheless separate from the Afghan Taliban.

The real attitude of the Pakistani military and elite to the population is exemplified by the methods they have employed in fighting the Islamacist insurgency that their reactionary decades' long alliance with Washington spawned—carpet-bombing, disappearances, and collective punishments. Today, six months on, most of the almost one million people the military forced from their homes in North Waziristan last June continue to be housed in tents and to survive on meagre rations.

The entire political establishment, including the main opposition party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), has rallied round the government's and military's call for an intensification of the bloodletting. For his part, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf leader Imran Khan announced that "in the interest of the nation" he is suspending his party's months long campaign to force Sharif and his government to resign.

Also rallying behind the government and military are the pseudo-left Awami Workers Party (AWP), which last June issued a statement hailing the government's launch of the North Waziristan offensive. According to a report in the *Nation*, an AWP leader told a rally in Islamabad "the government should hang all the terrorists" and "the nation" should "stand with army" and "support the army operation."

Pakistan's military has claimed last Tuesday's attack was commanded by Pakistan TTP leaders hiding in Afghanistan. On Wednesday, General Sharif hurried to Kabul to meet Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif

later claimed the meeting was "successful" adding, without explanation, that the fighting against the TTP may spill over onto "the Afghan side of the border."

For several years, Pakistan and Afghanistan have been accusing one another of sponsoring militant groups to attack the other. Washington and Kabul have long complained that the Pakistan military has provided a safe haven in North Waziristan to the Haqqani Network, an Islamacist militia allied with the Afghan Taliban, using it as a proxy to maintain influence in Afghanistan and, particularly, to counter Indian influence in the country.

Last year, the *New York Times* revealed that Afghan intelligence, initially with the support of elements in the US military-security apparatus, had begun to arm and otherwise help the TTP so as to place pressure on Islamabad.

Pakistan, which has won praise and financial rewards from Washington for its recent military offensive in FATA, is clearly attempting to use last week's TTP atrocity to pressure the Ghani government.

The ultimate target of the Pakistan ruling elite's drive to strengthen the hand of the state is the working class and oppressed masses.

The Sharif government is already in the process of implementing an International Monetary Fund (IMF) "restructuring" program, which will entail the privatization of key state-owned enterprises, threatening tens of thousands of workers with the loss of their jobs, and the elimination of most of the food and energy price subsidies that provide a vital lifeline for tens of millions of Pakistan's toilers.

Last week, the IMF approved a tranche of US \$1.05 billion, whose dispersal had been delayed because the IMF was dissatisfied with the government's speed in pursuing the restructuring program. Signalling the government's intention to move forward more aggressively with the IMF-demanded privatization campaign, the chairman of the government's special privatization commission, Mohammad Zubair, declared, "The process is absolutely on and financial advisers are performing their job." To underscore the government's determination, Zubair named as targets for early privatization several enterprises where workers have been especially militant in voicing their opposition, such as Pakistan Steel Mills and Pakistan International Airlines.



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