Dhaka hostage crisis ends in a violent military assault

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A hostage crisis that started last Friday night in the Bangladesh capital Dhaka ended in a bloodbath. On Saturday morning, Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's government ordered a full-scale military assault, involving commandos, into the restaurant, the Holey Artisan Bakery, where several gunmen had taken about three dozen people hostage.

Security forces claimed to have rescued 14 hostages. Twenty hostages, mainly foreigners, were reportedly killed by gunmen. Among them were nine Italians, seven Japanese, two Indians, one Bangladeshi and one US citizen. Six assailants were killed and one was captured in the raid, according to security officials.

The Awami League government launched this operation to bolster the power of the state apparatus and send clear signals to the US and other imperialist forces that it is firm on suppressing Islamist terror groups. In a televised statement, Hasina said: "My government is determined to root out terrorism and militancy from Bangladesh." Her government's action demonstrated that it had no concern about the lives of the hostages.

Whoever the perpetrators of Dhaka hostage-taking were, their action is a heinous crime. As some survivors told the media, gunmen began killing hostages on Friday night. They were asked to recite verses from the Koran, the Islamic holy book. Those who could do so were spared. Others were killed in cold blood, mostly hacked to death.

The terrorist attack has played into the hands of Hasina's government and its security forces, which is strengthening its repressive measures against her political opponents and the working class and poor amid a growing radicalisation, particularly among garment workers.

Exploiting earlier terrorist attacks, the government already has conducted a countrywide crackdown, mobilising thousands of police and paramilitary officers, and arresting more than 14,000 people. Contrary to the government's claims to be targeting Islamic extremists, many of those arrested are alleged ordinary criminals, as well as members and supporters of opposition parties, including the Bangladesh National Party (BNP).

The restaurant attacked last Friday is less than 1.5 kilometres from many foreign diplomatic missions, including the US Embassy. Gulshan, where the café is located, is an exclusive enclave, home to diplomats and some of the Bangladeshi elite. James Moriarty, former US ambassador to Bangladesh, characterised the area as "the epicentre of the entire country."

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) reportedly claimed responsibility for the attack through Amaq, an ISIS media branch. But Bangladeshi and American officials have expressed doubts. The US State Department initially said the claim could not be confirmed and it was assessing information. US officials said the attack was more likely to have from Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).

However, the Amaq site later published photographs apparently showing the inside of the café and some dead hostages while the siege was still going on. Although the authenticity of the photos has not been established, US officials shifted their focus to ISIS as the group behind the attack.

Bangladesh officials said all the perpetrators were from Bangladesh and part of a local Islamic group. National Police Chief Shahidul Hoque told the media: "Five of them were listed as militants and law enforcers made several drives to arrest them."

ISIS and Al Qaeda have claimed a number of earlier attacks, mostly targeting secular bloggers and academics and religious minorities, such as Hindus,

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Christians, Buddhists and Sufi Muslims. But Hasina's government has repeatedly denied the presence of any groups with international connections. Instead, she has blamed the official opposition BNP and fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI). The police have blamed Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) for such attacks.

Bangladesh has been convulsed by a deep political and social crisis as a result of the worsening global economic breakdown and the intensification of geo-political tensions. Faced with repeated struggles of workers in the garment sector, which accounts for 80 percent of the country's exports, the government has brutally suppressed their strikes and protests.

The US State Department said President Barack Obama was briefed about the hostage crisis in Dhaka and was closely observing the developments. It said the US "supports Prime Minister Hasina in her commitment to combat violent extremism in Bangladesh." Washington has concerns that any destabilisation of South Asia, including Bangladesh, would upset its strategic agenda in Asia, directed against China.

Because of the country's strategic location, at the "armpit" of India, which is Washington's main strategic partner in South Asia, and also its close proximity to China, Bangladesh is vital for the US in its "pivot to Asia" against Beijing. The US has been working to integrate Bangladesh closely into its preparations for war against China.

As a part of that agenda, the US has been pushing Hasina's government for closer collaboration in its "war on terror" by cracking down on Islamic extremist groups and allowing a greater US presence in Bangladesh. US will undoubtedly use Friday's attack to further its moves in that direction.

Islamist terrorism is the product of US-led wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. The ISIS was nurtured by the US proxy war in Syria, which is seeking to oust the Assad government, and benefit from the flow of arms and money to various Islamic fundamentalist groups from the US and its Middle Eastern allies.

US military attacks in the Middle East and Afghanistan, including its drone attacks on civilians, including women and children, killing thousands of people, have provided fertile ground for Islamic extremists such as ISIS to recruit Muslim youth throughout the world, including in South Asia, and also for local Islamic extremist groups.

The Dhaka hostage incident underscores the fact that Bangladesh, like the rest of South Asia, has been increasingly embroiled in the global geo-political tensions, intensified in Asia by the US efforts to militarily encircle China and isolate it diplomatically.

Other world and regional powers have seized on the Dhaka hostage-taking to strengthen their ties with Bangladesh, pursuing their own strategic interests. Japan, the European Union, Britain, France, Germany and India all condemned the terrorist attack and pledged their support to the Hasina government's efforts to "combat terrorism." Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sent Vice Foreign Minister Seiji Kihara, along with a team of "terrorism experts," to Dhaka.

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