

Militants strike as Pakistan cracks down

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Global Research Editor's Note

The investigation into the LET involvement is being conducted jointly by the FBI and Pakistan's military intelligence (ISI). Yet the ISI is known to support LET, as acknowledged in this Asian Times report.

Pakistan's ISI in close liaison with the CIA is supporting the alleged terrorists and at the same time it is involved in the police investigation.

KARACHI - Pakistan is taking action against the banned militant group Laskhar-e-Taiba (LET), which has been linked to the attacks in Mumbai in India last month in which nearly 200 people died.

Several people against whom evidence has been provided by the Indian authorities to Washington have been apprehended. The security forces on Sunday also arrested several militants in Muzzafarabad, the capital of Pakistani-administered Kashmir, where the militant group has traditionally been active.

However, the Jamaatut Dawa, which was formed separate from the LET's military activities when the LET was banned in 2002, will continue to operate as a political and welfare group. Pakistan cannot afford to take direct action against Jamaatut Dawa, an organization which is loyal to the state of Pakistan.

The crackdown on the LET is the result of pressure from Washington following the Mumbai attacks that Islamabad abandon its support for militancy.

However, this does not mean the end of militancy - the move will simply pass the LET-Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) nexus to the al-Qaeda network in South Asia.

Asia Times Online has learned that the public faces of the Jamaatut Dawa, such as its chief Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, will be spared. But people such as Zakiur Rahman, the commander-in-chief of the LET, are marked men for interrogation by a joint US Federal Bureau of Investigation-ISI team for their alleged role in the Mumbai attack.

A senior member of the LET confirmed to Asia Times Online that there had been a raid on one of the Jamaatut Dawa's offices, and warned that if Zakiur Rahman was grilled, it would be tantamount to civil war in Pakistan.

"So far the province of Punjab [the largest Pakistani province] has been spared from all sorts of violence, but if such action is carried out, Punjab will also burn in violence," he said.

The latest move might go some way to appeasing the US, but militancy cannot be easily stamped out – it has a habit of re-inventing itself.

In 2004, Pakistan shut down all militant training camps under immense US pressure and grilled several jihadi leaders. As a result, the LET broke and several hundred militants, trained by the ISI's India cell, joined hands with al-Qaeda in the North Waziristan and South Waziristan tribal areas of Pakistan. The Harkat-e-Jihad-i-Islami was merged into al-Qaeda structures as well. The latest action against the LET, once again taken under American pressure, will simply shift the LET fighters in al-Qaeda's structures in South Asia.

This transition is happening at a time when Pakistan is weakening with the passing of every day. Al-Qaeda and the neo-Taliban – Pakistani militants who have accepted al-Qaeda's ideology – are waiting for the elimination of all political boundaries so they can operate at will.

So far, they have succeeded in doing so in large parts of the tribal areas, and now increasingly they are causing chaos in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), where the state's control is limited to a few government offices and military camps.

There could also be fallout in India, where al-Qaeda could fill the vacuum left by the crackdown on the LET, even in Kashmir where, to date, indigenous Kashmiri groups have fought against India, keeping al-Qaeda at a distance.

Nevertheless, the Mumbai attack was the result of a LET-ISI nexus on the one side and al-Qaeda-linked groups in India on the other side in planning the operation. Al-Qaeda has enough resources to operate in India, even if it does not get help from the Pakistani side. The Bangladesh connection is still vibrant and al-Qaeda receives money, arms and human resources.

In the short term, India could be a more interesting place for al-Qaeda than Pakistan, due to the involvement of Israel. Israel is actively training Indian intelligence and Indian commandos after their poor performance during the Mumbai attack.

In addition, the US establishment hopes for victory for the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in upcoming elections as the US badly needs Indian assistance to win the war in South Asia. Unlike the ruling Congress-led government, a BJP government would not hesitate to provide all necessary support to US designs in the region.

Due to the current high security alert, stand-alone al-Qaeda-linked organizations in India (after the LET and the ISI are cut off from the scene), will not be able to carry out immediate strikes, but it is just a question of time.

Going for the jugular On Sunday night, militants carried out a devastating attack on North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) supplies on their way to Afghanistan. The attack in the provincial capital of Peshawar destroyed 50 containers.

Earlier in the day, they destroyed about 200 containers in another terminal in the city, the biggest attack yet on NATO supplies. Between 200 and 300 armed men were involved in the incident. A similar attack last week also destroyed a number of containers.

For the first time since the Taliban started attacking NATO supplies this year, there are

visible signs of some success in effectively depriving NATO of vital reinforcements.

Over 70% to 80% of NATO's supplies pass through NWFP on the way to Kabul in Afghanistan, with the remainder going through Pakistan's Balochistan province to Kanadahaar across the border. A very small proportion of supplies goes by air to the land-locked country.

Dr Farrukh Saleem, the executive director of the Center for Research and Security Studies in Pakistan and a renowned strategic writer, told Asia Times Online, "The Soviets' defeat in the Afghan war [in the 1908s] was primarily due to the cutting off of its supply lines. The mujahideen focussed on choking the supply routes from Central Asia into northern Afghanistan. At present, there is one US combat US brigade in Afghanistan [about 5,000 men]. This December, another combat brigade will arrive, while two more combat brigades will arrive next year. Therefore, more supplies will be needed. If, at this juncture, the militants cut off the supply lines, it will be devastating for NATO forces in Afghanistan."

Iran has already refused to allow NATO supplies through its territory, and while there is a pact for non-military NATO supplies to pass through Russia, this route is very expensive and cannot be relied on for regular supplies.

A NATO spokesperson said on Sunday that that morning's attack would have little impact on NATO's battle against the Taliban-led insurgency. All the same, if the rate of attacks continues, it is inevitable there will be shortages.

In July, when NATO-Taliban battles were at a pitch, sporadic Taliban attacks on NATO's supply lines reduced NATO's storage capacity of food and other items from one month to just a week at important bases such as Ghazni and Helmand.

There are estimates within militant camps that if they succeed in severing NATO supplies from Pakistan this year, NATO will have to leave Afghanistan in 2009.

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