

Suicide-Bomb Attack on Christian Church Kills 80 in Pakistan

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Twin suicide-bomb blasts Sunday at a Christian church in Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, killed at least 80 people and injured more than 140.

The dead included 34 women and 7 children, reported Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan. Medical officers at the Lady Reading Hospital, where many of the injured are being treated, have warned the death toll will likely rise further as many of the injured are in critical condition.

The attack on the All Saints Anglican Church in the predominantly Christian neighbourhood of Kohati Gate was designed to inflict maximum casualties. It was launched around 11 a.m. as some 600 parishioners were leaving Sunday morning mass and beginning to gather on the lawn outside the church for a free meal.

According to reports, the two bombers gunned down two policemen posted outside the church grounds. One subsequently detonated a bomb strapped to his vest, when confronted by a security guard outside the church. The other proceeded inside, then detonated his bomb. Preliminary investigation suggests at least six kilograms of explosives were used and indicate that the bombs contained ball bearings and other metal objects so as to maximize casualties.

A representative of Jundullah, one of the Sunni fundamentalist militia that make up the Pakistan Taliban, contacted several foreign-based news agencies, including the Associated Press, Reuters, and Agence France Presse (AFP), to claim responsibility for the attack.

Identified as Ahmad Marwat, the Jundullah spokesman said the attack had been carried out in retaliation for US drone strikes. "We carried out the suicide bombings at Peshawar church," Marwat told the AFP, "and will continue to strike foreigners and non-Muslims until drone attacks stop."

Reuters cited Marwat as saying, "(The Christians) are the enemies of Islam, therefore we target them. We will continue our attacks on non-Muslims on Pakistani land."

Earlier this month an all-party conference chaired by Pakistan's newly-elected prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, had agreed to offer the Pakistan Taliban peace talks. But in the wake of Sunday's bombing, Sharif signaled that the offer of negotiations is being rescinded.

"Such incidents are not conducive of peace talks," Sharif said while en route to New York to attend the United Nations' General Assembly. "Unfortunately, because of this, the

government is unable to move forward on what it had envisaged, on what it had wished for.”

The Pakistani army, which for decades patronized Sunni fundamentalist militia as a domestic and foreign policy tool, reportedly held a dim view of the government’s offer of negotiations and its opposition hardened after two senior army officers were killed in a roadside bombing near the Afghan border last week. Speaking on September 16, the head of Pakistan’s military, General Ashfaq Kayani, said the Pakistan Taliban should not “take advantage of the military’s support to the political process.” “The army,” he continued, “has the ability and the will to take the fight to the terrorists.”

Sunday’s bomb blasts provoked revulsion and anger across Pakistan.

In Peshwar, outraged residents of the Kohati Gate neighbourhood closed down shops, blocked traffic, and attacked police. According to a report in the Pakistani English-language daily *Dawn*, relatives of the victims of the bombing smashed windowpanes at the Lady Reading Hospital “in protest against the absence of doctors and paramedics and shortage of beds and medicine.” These shortages and absences had led to the deaths of many of the injured, they charged.

There were also protests mounted by members of Pakistan’s Christian minority in cities across Pakistan, including Karachi, Lahore, Quetta, Hyderabad, Faisalabad and the capital, Islamabad.

The protesters charged the authorities with failing to protect the Christian minority—echoing the complaints of Hazares and other members of the country’s Shia minority, who have been the target of mounting Sunni fundamentalist violence.

The local bishop for Peshawar, Sarfarz Hemphray, told the Associated Press, “We have been asking authorities to enhance security, but they haven’t paid any heed.”

Representing about two percent of Pakistan’s total population, Christians constitute one of Pakistan’s most economically-deprived groups, with many housed in slum colonies. They have been frequent targets of Pakistan’s reactionary blasphemy laws as well as sectarian violence.

Last March, police failed to come to the defence of the Christian residents of Lahore’s Joseph Colony when it was attacked by a mob of 1,000 people incited by accusations of blasphemy. More than 150 house and two churches were ransacked or destroyed by fire.

While Pakistan’s Christians have been the target of sectarian attacks in the past, Sunday’s bombing was far and away the most deadly ever attack.

It comes, however, within the context of mounting sectarian strife, most of its attributable to the Sunni fundamentalist militias, and widespread ethnic-political violence in Pakistan’s largest city, Karachi. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, in the 18 months between January 2012 and June 2013 there were 203 attacks in Pakistan in which people were targeted because of their religion, resulting in 717 deaths.

The rise of sectarian violence in Pakistan can be traced back to General Zia’s US-backed dictatorship, which, at Washington’s urging, funnelled arms and money to the mujahedeen in Afghanistan, while pursuing, with the help of the Saudi monarchy, an Islamization policy

at home that fuelled sectarian and ethnic strife.

Responding to Sunday's terrorist atrocity, Imran Khan, whose Pakistan Tahrik-e-Insaf forms the government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, said Sunday's terrorist atrocity was aimed at scuttling the prospective peace negotiations. "Isn't it strange," said Khan, "that whenever peace talks are pursued, these attacks take place, and I want to point out that there was also a drone strike today."

Khan was referring to a US drone strike Sunday that killed six people in North Waziristan.

Sharif is himself expected to raise the issue of drone strikes in his UN address this week. But the Obama administration has repeatedly ignored such protests. Its stated policy is to violate Pakistani sovereignty and summarily execute Pakistanis whenever it is in the "national interest."

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