

Mumbai II: Pakistan Faces Multiple Challenges

by Ramtanu Maitra

May 27—Today, terrorists struck viciously in Punjab’s most important city, Lahore, where they targeted the provincial headquarters of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), detonating an explosive-laden car, leaving at least 35 people dead and over 250 wounded. The Lahore police rescue building, and the Capital City Police Office (CCPO) collapsed in the attack. TV channels reported that approximately 40 vehicles were destroyed in the blast, which also caused considerable damage to nearby buildings.

The accuracy and size of the attack indicate that the attackers belong to the same group that carried out the assault on Mumbai, India last November. At that time, Lyndon LaRouche warned that there could be more Mumbai-style hits. The Lahore attack, although in Pakistan, can be ascribed as Mumbai II. In fact, Punjab Gov. Salman Taseer of Pakistan said the terrorists who attacked the Sri Lankan cricket team last March, were the same as those who had struck in Mumbai in November 2008. He said: “It was a planned terrorist act on the pattern of the attack on Mumbai. I believe the same terrorists are involved in both the incidents.”

The terrorist hit squad headed their vehicle towards the two buildings located just off Lahore’s famed Mall Road, where they were stopped by heavily armed guards; at that point, they exchanged fire with the

guards, before setting off a massive blast. District coordination officer of Lahore Sajjad Ahmed Bhutta said a car loaded with explosives rammed into the barriers on the road leading to the buildings housing ISI and the Lahore police office. The attack came one day after Taliban spokesman Maulvi Mohammad Omar threatened strikes across Pakistan, if the military operation in the Swat Valley was not stopped immediately

Helplessness and Confusion

The Obama Administration has established a special \$400 million annual fund to help Pakistan fight the extremists. The Pakistan Counterinsurgency Capabilities Fund (PCCF) will provide the Pakistani military with equipment and training for counterinsurgency missions. The PCCF was added to the war supplemental that the U.S. House of Representatives passed on May 14 and the Senate approved on May 21. U.S. officials say that the PCCF will also allow Centcom chief Gen. David Petraeus to press for additional Pakistani acceptance of U.S. training.

Beyond allocation of money from the safe confines in Washington, the helplessness and confusion that prevails in the corridors of the Obama Administration over its Afghanistan-Pakistan policy cannot be overstated. The *Los Angeles Times* reported on May 25 about a



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The Pakistani Army attack on the Taliban in the Swat Valley has caused more than 2.5 million residents to flee, as the terrorists melt away into the surrounding hills and forests. It is feared that thousands of terrorists may be hiding among the refugees. Shown, Swat refugees, at a World Food Programme warehouse in Mardan.

recent visit which Richard Holbrooke, the Administration's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, made to China and Saudi Arabia; he appealed to China to provide training and even military equipment to help Pakistan counter a growing militant threat, U.S. officials said.

The American appeal to China underscores the country's importance in security issues. However, China has never dealt with an insurgency of any strength or duration. Anyone who follows the Chinese methods of internal security would know that, in the Chinese assessment, there are two "terrorist/insurgent" organizations that pose a threat: the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) and the Islamic Movement of East Turkestan (IMET) of the Uighurs. In dealing with these insurgents, who cannot really be compared with what Pakistan is facing today, China has adopted conventional warfare methods combined with heavy restrictions on political activity. The Obama Administration does not understand that if Pakistan has to adopt even some of these methods, it will soon be ruled by a combination of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The insurgents are now everywhere within the country. They, as well as a large section of the population, have become anti-American, and many have turned against the Pakistani Army.

Target: Lahore or ISI?

What happened in Lahore was unique, but not altogether unexpected. Lahore was also the scene of an attack on the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team on March 3, in which eight people, including six police officials, were killed, and six cricketers were injured. A police source informed the Indian news agency PTI that some suspects involved in the attack on the cricket team were being interrogated in the ISI building.

On March 4, 2008, the Taliban attacked another Pakistani military target outside of the tribal areas. That suicide bombing occurred inside the Pakistani Naval War College in Lahore. Seven were killed and 21 wounded; it was reported that most of those killed were military officers and enlisted men.

Some suspects involved in the Naval War College attack were being interrogated at the Federal Investigation Agency building. On March 11, 2009, after the passage of almost a year, the seven-storey building of the FIA was attacked, when a mini-truck full of explosives struck it, leaving at least 30 people, including 13 FIA officials, dead at the spot, and over 200 injured.

The targeting of security offices in Lahore indicates that terrorism has sunk its roots deep inside Punjab. Two other Punjab cities, the capital city of Islamabad and the garrison-city of Rawalpindi, have already been attacked on a number of occasions. This poses a serious threat to Pakistan's stability, since as many as 75% of its military, and ISI agents, hail from Punjab.

Following the attack on the CCPO and the ISI building, President Asif Ali Zardari's government has decided to summon a national security conference to be attended by the chief ministers, interior ministers of the four provinces, and other top officials. The decision was taken in a high-level meeting on May 27 chaired by Zardari. In a briefing to the press afterwards, the Federal Minister for Information and Broadcast, Qamar Zaman Kaira, said that the meeting also decided to constitute a national security committee that would review police and prison reform.

The attack on the ISI provincial headquarters in Lahore brings to the fore the validity of fresh reports

about the tussle in progress between the ISI and Pakistan's Intelligence Bureau (IB), which comes under the Ministry of the Interior, led by Rehman Malik, perhaps the closest confidant of Zardari.

The IB was marginalized by the ISI over the years, thanks to military rule in Pakistan. The ISI took control of not only foreign intelligence, which is its assigned task, but also domestic intelligence. In addition to the military rulers, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif played a major role in undermining the IB. This was perhaps because he was helped in the parliamentary elections in the 1990s by the ISI.

But in recent days, a change has begun to occur. According to a senior Indian analyst, since the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led coalition government came to office in March 2008, there have been indications that Zardari has wanted to implement the ideas of the late Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto for the reorganization of the IB and strengthening of its role in internal security. He appointed Rehman Malik, a retired police officer, who had served under Benazir Bhutto in the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) during her second term as prime minister, as the Advisor for Internal Security with the rank of a Cabinet minister. He now coordinates all internal security matters and the IB work.

Zardari has restored the practice of having a senior police officer head the IB, and reportedly wanted all those recruited to the IB during Bhutto's second term, to be reappointed. PPP sources told the analyst that Prime Minister Yousef Raza Gilani, a Punjabi who has the backing of the ISI, has been dragging his feet in the implementation of Zardari's orders to reappoint those recruits who were sacked or kept out by earlier regimes. As a result, differences between Zardari and Malik on the one side, and Gilani and the ISI on the other, regarding the relative roles of the IB and the ISI, are hindering a proper investigation into the role of the five detained activists of the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET) in the conspiracy to carry out the terrorist attack in Mumbai Nov. 26-29, 2008. According to these sources, while Zardari and Malik are in favor of a more energetic investigation and prosecution to please the U.S., Gilani and the ISI have been opposing it.

The Emerging Threats

Pakistan has long been facing serious security threats. But the threats have multiplied many-fold fol-

lowing the Army's assault on militants in the Swat Valley, which began in late April. Using conventional warfare, Pakistani Army went into the Valley with all guns blazing, causing more than 2.5 million residents to escape helter-skelter. Although Army spokesmen continue to announce "success" in its mission, it is most unlikely that the terrorists, who belong to a slew of groups, directly confronted the Army. It is more likely, as we have seen before, that they melted away into the hills and forests that dot the Valley. Needless to say, such military operations have limits, but what is worse, is that millions of refugees were left with inadequate attention, and it is anybody's guess how many thousands of terrorists have joined the refugees fleeing out of Swat.

A Taliban spokesman told AFP on May 25 that commander Maulana Fazlullah has asked his fighters to stop battling Pakistani troops in Mingora, the capital of northwest Swat Valley. Pakistani security forces have been pounding Taliban positions in three northwest districts, and on May 23, moved into Mingora, the business and administrative hub of the Swat region. "Maulana Fazlullah has bravely directed all his mujahideen to stop resistance in Mingora and its surroundings to avoid hardships to the people and losses to the civilian population," spokesman Muslim Khan told AFP. "Most of our mujahideen have already left Mingora," he told another news agency by telephone, from an undisclosed location, saying only that he was speaking from a mountain top.

Previous Pakistani efforts against the militants have faltered on the military's over-reliance on heavy artillery barrages—a symptom of its training and equipping primarily for conventional warfare against India. The inevitable civilian casualty toll from such operations has quickly eroded local support, alienating even those who had initially welcomed the Army's arrival in Swat. Moreover, the Pakistani authorities' handling of the displaced population may exacerbate the security situation. Nine months after the military moved against militants in the Bajaur Tribal Agency, tens of thousands of displaced people still languish in squalid camps around the northwest, with little prospect of returning home any time soon.

Pakistan's Quaid-e-Azam University professor and a physicist of international repute, Pervez Hoodbhoy, recently led his students and other faculty members to provide help to the refugees from Swat. He wrote in his

blog: “The bad news is that Swat, Buner, Dir, etc. are drowning in children. Every family to which we supplied provisions had 7 or more children. One man scratched his head—he thought he had 16 or 17 kids, but could not quite remember. In the school-housed community of 300 refugees, housed at 40 per classroom, 4 kids had been born in the last 20 days, and more were on the way. If this pace continues, the world will run out of oxygen.

“Swat refugees told us that they had fled both because of Taliban atrocities and army action (F-16’s, tank and mortar shelling). Many blamed the Taliban for their predicament, but said they actually fled because of the military action. Nevertheless, perhaps out of fear of talking to strangers like us, they were not prepared to condemn either side.”

According to other Pakistani observers, the crisis of the displaced persons not only threatens to turn public opinion against the government, it also creates a political opportunity for extremist groups. In the aftermath of the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, the government proved ineffective in delivering relief to those affected, and the vacuum was filled by Jamaat-ud-Dawa—deemed a front organization for the LET, and since banned; the group won considerable prestige for its relief efforts, which raised the political risk of clamping down on it. “The longer the crisis continues, the more difficult it will become,” says Hasan Askari-Rizvi, a respected military analyst. “It will make the humanitarian problem more acute and criticism of the operation will rise.”

Sindh Destabilized

The refugee crisis has begun to destabilize Pakistan’s other province, Sindh, as well. Reports indicate, in Karachi, Pakistan’s biggest city and the Sindh provincial capital, Pushtun refugees coming in from Swat and Bajaur agency were pitted against the city’s majority Urdu-speaking population and Sindhis. The Jeay Sindh Qaumi Mahaz (JSQM) has threatened to demolish the relief camp for the Swat displaced, set up by the Sindh government on the outskirts of Karachi, if the authorities did not wind it up in 24 hours, a private TV channel reported on May 24.

Asia Times reported that the fleeing refugees spent the night at the provincial border with the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), as Sindh’s PPP-led government succumbed to political pressure to prevent

their entry, from Sindhi nationalist parties and the Mutahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which represents urban Sindh’s Urdu-speaking population. The MQM, which raised the danger of the “Talibanization” of Karachi several months ago, has already demanded an end to “unchecked” Pushtun migration, alleging that Taliban terrorists were using this method to infiltrate the city.

An alarmed Prime Minister Gilani urged Pakistanis to “embrace the refugees, don’t shun them.” Sindh Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah, on May 23, allowed the refugees into the province. But, there has already been violence. A senior activist of the Sunni terrorist group Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) was gunned down on May 24. He was in charge of the banned religious outfit, and had earlier worked for another Sunni-terrorist group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (the LeJ (SSP and the LeJ are linked). Area Superintendent of Police Javed Akbar Riaz said the SSP’s rival Shi’a groups had claimed the SSP workers were targeting them and the imambargah (Shi’a mosque).

In the front-line state NWFP, bordering tribal agencies and Afghanistan, and which includes the Swat Valley, the Taliban insurgency has crippled the economy, left thousands unemployed, and exacerbated the poverty that produces fundamentalism, business leaders have said.

The NWFP is rich in agriculture, minerals, scenic beauty once popular with tourists, and multiple local industries. However, the 21st Century has brought decline due to extremist violence in the adjacent tribal areas and Swat districts, where the Taliban launched an uprising two years ago. “Around three-quarters of our industries have closed since the war in Afghanistan started, but most have closed in the last two to three years,” Sharafat Mubarak, president of the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said. Before the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and ensuing Taliban insurgency, 2,254 industries were functional in NWFP, of which just 594 operate today, he said. “We had more than 100,000 people employed in those industries but now just 18,000 are there and the rest have lost their jobs.” The decline has accelerated over the past six months, during which Pakistan battled Taliban fighters, agreed to a ceasefire in part of the NWFP, and last month, launched a renewed offensive as the Taliban advanced further towards Islamabad.