

Terrorist attack in Pakistan kills more than 130 children

By Keith Jones
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A terrorist attack Tuesday by the Tehreek-e-Taliban or Pakistan Taliban on a military-supported public school in Peshawar in north-west Pakistan left more than 150 people dead—the vast majority of them children.

The attack was clearly designed to inflict the maximum loss of civilian life. It reportedly involved seven men, several or all of them wearing suicide bombs. Around 10 a.m. local time, the assailants hopped a wall to gain access to the school, then stormed inside. On entering a first-floor assembly area filled with students, they opened fire. Explosions followed.

The school became the scene of a firefight, as Pakistan's military forces, which have facilities nearby, intervened and set about capturing the school.

Exchanges of gunfire continued for hours. Only at the end of the afternoon did Pakistani authorities announce they had secured the school.

How the attack ensued or even how the attackers were ultimately killed remains almost completely unknown. A Reuters report noted: "It was not clear whether some or all of the children were killed by gunmen, suicide bombs or in the ensuing battle with Pakistani security forces trying to gain control of the (school) building."

The dead include at least 132 children—most reportedly 13, 14 and 15 years-olds; nine teachers and school staff; one Pakistani military commando; and the seven attackers. The attack also left more than 120 wounded, many seriously.

The Army Public School and College receives financial support from the military and is attended by sons and daughters of military personnel stationed in Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. However, it is a public school open to the general population and most of its more than 1,000 students hail from civilian families.

In claiming responsibility for the horrific attack, a Pakistan Taliban spokesman said it was in retaliation for

the Pakistani military's offensive in North Waziristan and more recently Khyber, two districts of Pakistan's Federally-Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). "We selected the army's school for the attack because the government is targeting our families and females," declared Muhammad Umar Khorasani. "We want them to feel the pain."

The military's brutal assault in North Waziristan, at the behest of Washington and in close partnership with the Pentagon and CIA, is the unreported war. The Western media did report its launch last June, but since then have not deemed it worthy of coverage.

Yet this war has the hands of the US all over it. It is being waged with the aim of militarily squeezing the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network, another Islamist militia opposed to the US occupation of Afghanistan and the US client regime in Kabul.

For a decade, the US has demanded that Pakistan subjugate the traditionally autonomous FATA, so as to deny the Afghan Taliban a "safe haven." The first military offensive, ordered by the US-back dictator General Musharraf in 2004, gave rise to the Pakistan Taliban—a FATA-based, Pashtun anti-Pakistan government Islamist insurgency that is in alliance with, but distinct, from the Afghan Taliban.

Last June, without any warning to the civilian population, Pakistan's military launched aerial and artillery bombardments of alleged terrorist hideouts in North Waziristan, many in densely populated areas. Three days later, the military ordered a pause, but only to order the district's entire population to evacuate the area within little more than 48 hours. Those who did not flee, announced the military with the government's full support, would be considered terrorists—in other words targeted for death.

Once its evacuation deadline passed, the military, which is notorious for its human rights abuses, including

“disappearances” and collective punishments of FATA residents, resorted to its standard practice of indiscriminate attacks, flattening schools and whole villages. Later, the offensive was extended to parts of Khyber, resulting in a new flood of internal refugees.

Six months on, most of North Waziristan’s almost one million residents remain displaced. While some have found shelter with family or friends in neighbouring districts of Pakistan or even Afghanistan, at least 700,000 people are living in squalid refugee camps. Due to a combination of callous indifference and incompetence, the refugees have little government support and remain housed in tents, despite the onset of winter.

Washington’s close involvement in the military offensive is underscored by the fact that just days before its launch, the US conducted its first drone strikes in Pakistan in six months, with multiple attacks in North Waziristan.

US drones have continued to rain down death ever since, slaughtering women, children and other non-combatants, and terrorizing the population, as has been documented in numerous studies, including from the UN.

Pakistan’s political and military leaders were quick to seize on yesterday’s atrocity as the pretext for intensifying the offensive. “The fight will continue,” vowed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. “No one should have any doubt about it. We will take account of each and every drop of our children’s blood.”

In the evening, a Pakistan military spokesman tweeted that the military had carried out raids and ten air strikes in Khyber.

Western leaders also sought to exploit yesterday’s tragic events to justify aggression, including the US’s new war in the Mideast. US President Barack Obama, who has presided over drone strikes that have killed hundreds, if not thousands, of Pakistanis and who has ordered the US national-security apparatus to arm Islamists to spearhead regime change in Libya and Syria, producing a vortex of sectarian conflict and chaos, feigned outrage. “By targeting students and teachers in this heinous act, terrorists,” Obama said, “have once again shown their depravity.”

Obama pledged to strengthen the reactionary alliance between Washington and Islamabad that has seen the US back one Pakistani military dictator after another and use Pakistan as a satrap in its predatory foreign policy for the past six decades.

The Washington-Islamabad axis has proved ruinous for

the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Taliban, whether in Afghanistan or Pakistan, are among its products.

During the 1980s, the US, in league with Pakistani intelligence and the Saudi monarchy, organized, financed and armed the Afghan mujahedeen, from which the Taliban ultimately emerged, to fight the pro-Soviet government in Kabul, as part of Washington’s renewed offensive against the Soviet Union.

This policy also entailed full-throated US support for the Pakistani dictator Zia-ul-Huq, who conducted a massive Islamization campaign so as to build up a reactionary counter-weight against the Pakistani working class.

Then in 2001, the Bush administration seized on the 9/11 attacks to implement a predetermined policy of imperialist aggression, aimed at shoring up US global hegemony amid a huge decline in its economic strength. Under threat of US attack, Pakistan broke its ties to the Taliban and became the military-logistical beachhead for Washington’s invasion of Afghanistan.

The ensuing 13 years have only seen crime piled upon crime. The US and its allies have waged a dirty colonial-style war to sustain a corrupt puppet regime in Kabul, while prevailing on Pakistan’s government to turn much of the country’s north-west into killing fields so as to bolster the Afghan occupation.

Workers’ outrage at yesterday’s attack should be directed first and foremost at those responsible, through decades of imperialist oppression, violence and geo-political machinations, for Islamist terrorism, beginning with the US elite, their Western co-conspirators and the venal communalist Pakistani bourgeoisie.

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