

Terrorist attack hits crowded children's park in Pakistan

By Sampath Perera
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A bomb blast in Pakistan at a crowded children's park in a residential area of Lahore on Sunday evening has killed at least 69 people and injured 300 others. The atrocity, which was clearly designed to cause a maximum loss of life, is suspected to have been carried out by a suicide bomber who set off the explosion in a parking lot, just metres from children's swings.

"When the blast occurred, the flames were so high they reached above the trees and I saw bodies flying in the air," a witness told Reuters. The number of dead and injured is still rising with the majority women and children. The blast also caused a stampede leading to more casualties as panicked and stunned survivors tried to escape the crowded park and surrounding neighbourhood.

According to the *Washington Post*, Jamaat ul-Ahrar, a splinter group of Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP), claimed responsibility for the attack. A spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan declared that "the Christians in Lahore, celebrating Easter" were the target. The blast, he said, was to send "a message to the government" that more attacks would come until Sharia or Islamic law is imposed in Pakistan.

While terrorist attacks are less frequent in Punjab province, of which Lahore is the capital, Christians and other religious minorities are often targeted elsewhere in Pakistan by Sunni Islamic fundamentalists. According to a tally by the Pakistan-based *Nation*, 1,700 people have died in 117 attacks over the last four years.

Regardless of who carried out the heinous crime on Sunday, it serves reactionary ends. The attack will be used to justify the further militarisation of the country, increase Pakistan's support for the US neo-colonial occupation of neighbouring Afghanistan and expand the powers of the Pakistani military. The country's

armed forces wield enormous economic and political power and have ruled the country with Washington's support for decades, most recently under General Pervez Musharraf between 1999 and 2008.

The TTP's attack in December 2014 on a military-supported school in Peshawar that killed 133 children was immediately exploited by the current Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) government with the backing of the political establishment. The PML-N government gave extraordinary powers to the military under expanded "anti-terrorism" laws, including the re-establishment of a military court system that can try civilians in secret session. The army immediately escalated its occupation of Karachi under the guise of cracking down on "crime" and "terrorism."

Following the 2014 attack, the government also lifted a moratorium on executions imposed in 2008, leading to a spate of hangings. According to a Reuters report, only 39 of the 351 executed "involved people linked to a known militant group or guilty of crimes linked to militancy." In 2015, Pakistan carried out the third highest number of executions in the world.

The Pakistani government "strongly" condemned Sunday's terror bombing, as did the US. "Attacks like these only deepen our shared resolve to defeat terrorism around the world," State Department spokesman John Kirby said. White House National Security Council spokesman Ned Price declared that the US would work with Pakistan "to root out the scourge of terrorism."

Such language only means that US imperialism will intensify its intervention in the region which has already been deeply destabilised by its efforts to bully Pakistan to "do more" to support American geo-strategic objectives.

Despite these official denunciations, the ultimate

responsibility for the latest atrocity lies with Washington and Islamabad that have both promoted reactionary Islamism and used it to justify their wars.

During the 1980s, as it sought to create “a Vietnam” for the Soviet Union, the US financed, organised, and armed the Mujahedeen militias to topple the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. It also propped up General Zia ul-Haq’s military dictatorship in Islamabad which turned Pakistan into a conduit for Islamists. At the same time, General Zia carried out a brutal “Islamising” campaign of the country directed at suppressing the working class in Pakistan.

Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Kabul were the consequences of this massive CIA-led operation. Following the September 11 attacks, the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to overthrow the Taliban and force Pakistan to break its ties to the Taliban regime. Washington also demanded that Islamabad prop up the US occupation of Afghanistan by suppressing anti-occupation militias based along the border in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan.

The Pakistani military has carried out a series of devastating military expeditions to occupy the historically-autonomous FATA regions, provoking bitter opposition. The US invasion of Afghanistan and the Pakistani military operations have led to the rise of what became known as the TTP. Also known as the Pakistan Taliban, it is an umbrella group which is ideologically affiliated to, but distinct from, the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The sheer brutality of the Pakistani military offensives and the CIA-run drone war in the FATA which terrorised the entire population, killing and maiming thousands of civilians, including women and children, has resulted in an increasing number of terrorist attacks in other parts of Pakistan. The worst hit have been religious minorities who are increasingly the victims of sectarian violence.

Following the December 2014 Peshawar terror attacks, the Pakistani military, in close collaboration with Washington, has been waging a war in North Waziristan and the FATA tribal agencies. This offensive has triggered a massive humanitarian crisis displacing more than a million people, most of them forced to flee and live in squalid refugee camps.

After Sunday’s blast, Pakistan’s military top-brass,

the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and other intelligence agencies, was hurriedly convened in parallel with a meeting by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and senior government figures. As in the wake of the Peshawar school attack what is now under consideration is a new wave of military attacks in the FATA regions, accompanied by further anti-democratic measures, which further expand Pakistan’s devastating civil war.

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