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## Terror strikes switch to Karachi

By Syed Fazl-e-Haider

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KARACHI - At least 45 people including women and children were killed and 150 others wounded as twin blasts on Sunday evening ripped through a densely populated area near Abbas Town, a Shi'ite-dominated area in Pakistan's southern port city of Karachi. The attack came two days after the country's major political parties urged the government to take immediate steps to initiate peace talks with Taliban militants.

Shops and businesses in the country's commercial capital were to remain closed on Monday, as Karachi mourns those killed in the terror attack. The blasts, which were fueled by at least 150 kilograms of explosives, destroyed two apartment buildings and damaging dozens of shops. A blast near a Shi'ite mosque in the same area in November killed two people and injured more than a dozen.

Karachi is emerging as another "sectarian flashpoint" after Quetta, where the minority Hazara Shi'ite community is bearing the brunt of repeated attacks by Sunni militants, which this year saw blasts on February 16 and January 10 in the southwestern city kill 200 people. The surge in attacks is fueling speculation that violence could mar a general election scheduled to take place by mid-May. Commentators are already saying that the coming campaign season could become a "gory exercise", while political parties and tribal leaders have called for a grand tribal gathering with the Taliban to try to secure more peaceful conditions for the vote.

Two Sunni clerics and a madrassah (religious seminary) student were shot dead last month in broad daylight in Karachi. The port city has already been hit by violence on ethnic, political, criminal and sectarian lines. Last year, 2,200 people were killed in violence in Karachi, while

only in first two months of this year more than 450 people lost their lives in targeted killings. The extortionists single out businessmen and traders who refuse to pay extortion money. The government and its law enforcers have blatantly failed to protect the lives of citizens.

Local bomb experts suggested that a remote-detonated improvised explosive device used in the Abbas Town attack was planted at an entrance to the area, with another low intensity blast reported to have followed the main one. Their findings suggest that a car was used to transport the devices. Muttahida Qaumi Movement, the largest political party in Karachi and the Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen, an alliance of Shi'ite parties, called for a day of mourning.

Of the anti-Shi'ite groups that could be responsible for Sunday's strike, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has not come forward to accept responsibility. The TTP last week warned that terror attacks would continue until a peace deal was finalized. Many believe that the banned Sunni outfits might be involved, including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), which is linked to both al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban and had claimed responsibility for this year's deadly attacks on Hazaras. Last year, more than 400 Shi'ite Muslims were killed in the country.

Pakistani authorities on February 22 arrested Malik Ishaq, the LeJ chief from his home at Rahim Yar Khan town in the eastern Punjab province, where the LeJ is believed to have roots. Hazaras demanded the government put him on trial for Shi'ite killings in Quetta, the capital of southwestern Balochistan province.

Ishaq's arrest came a day after the Pakistani army denied any links to LeJ. Human rights activists have accused the army and its intelligence agencies of maintaining links with the outlawed militant group. Critics say that Ishaq was released as a result of a deal after he negotiated with terrorists who attacked the military headquarters in Rawalpindi city in October 2009.

"The armed forces were not in contact with any militant organization, including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi," Dawn reported inter-services public relations chief Major-General Asim Bajwa as saying. "There is no reason to think about army's involvement with LJ [LeJ]."

Ishaq was not detained for the first time but he spent 14 years in jail for his alleged involvement in dozens of cases of terrorism before being released in July 2011. He was arrested last year and held for a few days for fueling sectarian disharmony. He was also accused of masterminding the 2009 attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore, in which eight Pakistani citizens were killed and several players were wounded.

Ishaq last year called Shi'ite as "greatest infidels on earth" in an interview with Reuters. Ishaq is also the vice president of the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, which was formerly known Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan. He was released every time because no witness dared speak against him in court and hence charges could not be proved.

Punjab government is blamed by political rivals for having links with the banned Sunni outfit. Interior Minister Rehman Malik has repeatedly pointed out that LeJ has safe havens in Punjab and asked the Punjab government to take action against the group. Malik has already stated the

explosive material used in the February 16 Quetta bombing had been procured in Lahore, the capital of Punjab province.

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz led by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif strongly denies any links with the banned LeJ, dismissing accusations as baseless propaganda against the Punjab government.

The Australian government on humanitarian grounds has reportedly offered asylum to 2,500 Hazara families affected by terrorism. The Hazara Shi'ite community has lost hope in civilian administrations, as its leaders repeatedly demand the handover of Quetta to the control of Pakistan army in the belief that only the military can protect them and take stern action against the terrorists.

The Express Tribune in a recent editorial said:

No political force of the country can combat such non-state actors; not even the police or Rangers because they are trained very differently from the existing civilian forces. Our army's special combat units are trained so that they are the only ones which can respond to the present type of warfare. Besides, the Pakistan Army has had winning experience in Swat, South Waziristan and, to some extent, in North Waziristan. If our army does not intervene this time to stop the decimation of Shias, then we can forget about the presence of the Shia population in Pakistan. They could request for refuge in Iran, Iraq or any western country. This is the last and only chance for Pakistan. It is time for our sectarian extremist outfits to pack up from the country and leave, before the citizens of this country are forced to do so.