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## The Pakistan Army's Curious Punjab Operation

**For an offensive supposedly aimed at terrorists, the military has selected some odd targets.**

By Sachchal Ahmad  
May 02, 2016

Just hours after a bomb attack on an Easter celebration in Lahore, the capital of Punjab, killed 75 and injured 340, Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif ordered “counter-terror” operations throughout the province. Initial reports suggested that the bomber had been a resident of Muzaffargarh District, in the south of Punjab, a part of the country often described as a hotbed of Islamic extremists and militants. So apparently determined was the military in undertaking these operations in Punjab, and frustrated with civilian reticence on the matter, that the army chief even announced that its operations would not be conducted in coordination with civilian law enforcement, as had been proposed prior to the attack. In the face of such pressure, the government quickly acquiesced and ordered the launch of an operation in south Punjab. It seemed as if the army had finally decided to fulfill the long-standing demand for action against militancy and extremism in Punjab, with the Lahore attack providing the catalyst.

However, the very next day Jamat-ul-Ahrar, a faction of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), claimed responsibility and released images of the suicide bomber. The group, based in the Mohmand Agency in Pakistan’s tribal areas, has launched six attacks since December last year. Police also admitted that the original suspect from south Punjab had no link to the explosion. Despite this, the police, intelligence agencies, and armed forces seemingly charged on with raids in Punjab, reportedly arresting 5,221 and killing five in a matter of days.

In the first week of April, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the military's media wing, confirmed the launch of a coordinated operation in Punjab. It said that an operation was being carried out by civil and military law enforcement agencies, including the paramilitary Rangers, police, and Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD), against "hardened criminal and ferraris [fugitives]." The statement singled out Rojhan, in district Rahim Yar Khan, particularly parts known as the "Katcha" areas, saying that they were being used as refuges by "terrorists" from other parts of the country. Some sources reported that the operation was being overseen by Corps Commander Lahore, Lt. Gen. Sadiq Ali, with army troops, Punjab Police, CTD, and Rangers participating.

The Katcha areas are small islands within the Indus River, which have over the years served as hideouts for criminal outfits due to their remoteness and inaccessibility. The most notorious of these groups has been the Chotu gang, an outfit known for its local criminal activities such as kidnapping for ransom. Four operations have been launched against the group by the police in the past, only to see it resurface in the area some time later.

News reports indicate that the operation began during the first few days of April. Provincial police bosses pressured local police officials to immediately launch the operation, though the latter had asked for 25 days to prepare. It was no surprise then that the operation, dubbed "Zarb-e-Ahan," was badly bungled, with at least one child and six officers killed and 25 taken hostage. The police resorted to calling for air support from the military, which in turn took full control of the operation on April 15. The army proceeded to pound the gang with Cobra helicopters and issued an ultimatum which lead leader Chotu (also known as Ghulam Rasool) and 175 members of his gang to surrender unconditionally on April 20. Media suggested local tribal leaders had also been involved in indirect negotiations between the gang and security forces. Reportedly, over 1,500 military personnel (including SSG commandoes) and 900 paramilitary troops were deployed in the region. This was in addition to the 1,600 police personnel who were initially conducting the operation.

While various claims were made in the press alleging that the Chotu gang had ties to Baloch insurgents, the TTP, or even the Indian intelligence agency RAW, no definitive links have emerged as of yet. A look at the gang's history suggests that while they were no petty criminals, their activities were purely criminal in nature. Indeed, a few days prior to his surrender, Chotu himself spoke to the press and affirmed his loyalty to the country and went out of his way to deny allegations of engaging in terrorism. He told *The News*, "We are not terrorists. We are not enemies of this country. We are landlords. We don't want to quit our houses. Let us live." Some of the gang members, who surrendered when the army initially took charge of the operation, said they could not fight the troops "out of respect for the institution." The local District Police Officer (DPO) also ruled out any possibility of involvement of Baloch militants and other terrorist organizations in the area.

While the armed forces offered some limited support to the police in the previous four operations, it was nothing close to this scale. The question then arises: why here, and why now, was the army willing to invest so much manpower and resource in neutralizing a group that had nothing (at least directly) to do with the Lahore attacks or terrorism in general? The source of

this urgency and newfound impetus may lie in developments related to Pakistan's new geopolitical aspirations.

A quick look at the map reveals that the Katcha areas of Punjab lie in close proximity to the eastern and central routes of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as well as the Indus Highway. Groups like the Chotu gang, which is only the most prominent criminal outfit operating in the area, would pose a direct threat to the security and safety of activities on these key highways. In 2005, the same Chotu gang abducted 12 Chinese engineers from the Indus Highway.

As work on the CPEC ramps up, the need to assure the Chinese that Pakistan can provide the promised security has gained urgency. A recent statement by a Chinese official said that CPEC would be completed ahead of schedule, with the first phase of the project slated for completion sometime during 2017-18. The Pakistani military has been particularly involved in pushing for CPEC and is going to great lengths to prove to the Chinese that security will not be an obstacle. As one example, it has committed to raising a Special Security Division (SSD), consisting of nine army battalions and six wings of the civil armed forces, specifically for the safety of Chinese engineers and workers. Perhaps the most important indication that the army is preparing for the impending task of securing CPEC came on April 13, when General Raheel Sharif himself announced that the first cargo from China will reach Gwadar port (the terminus of CPEC) this year.

At the same time, the army views itself as a major stakeholder in CPEC and is seeking an increasing role in the implementation of CPEC-related projects. Last week it was reported that the military establishment was looking to establish a formal role for itself in the administration and execution of CPEC. Reportedly, the army has proposed the establishment of a CPEC authority to the federal government. Another proposal suggests including CPEC in the National Action Plan (NAP), Pakistan's counter-terrorism policy adopted last year. Hints that the military is not satisfied with the pace of progress on CPEC are also ubiquitous.

The case of the operation against Chotu gang case has some interesting implications. First, it is no longer clear what the objectives of this operation (or series of operations) in Punjab are. While originally portrayed as a response to terrorist actors, they are yet to produce any substantial results on that front. As one example, Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar remains in "protective custody" of the Punjab government. As another, in the aftermath of the announcement of the Punjab operation, sectarian politico-militant group Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), the reincarnation of Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and perhaps the most-cited example of Punjabi militancy, asked its followers to go underground and reported that none of its members or leaders had been arrested as of March 31.

Furthermore, there is also no concrete evidence that the civilian government or military have changed their attitudes toward the various Punjab-based outfits they have long been accused of being soft on. For instance, Lashkar-e-Taiba founder and Jamat ud Dawah chief Hafiz Saeed has been steadily and openly addressing events and congregations in Lahore in recent days. Doubts have even been expressed over the mass arrests by police and intelligence agencies in the days following the Lahore attack. An analyst referred to it as an "exercise" conducted after high

profile attacks. He went on, “This is more for the consumption of the public. They just round up these guys, and after a few days, when the furor dies down, they release them for lack of evidence. I don’t see it as any meaningful action.” Indeed, 5,005 of the 5,221 arrested were released without charge soon after their arrest.

What this case does demonstrate are two things: first, the military is increasingly willing to take over ‘policing’ duties, particularly where its interests are concerned; and secondly, the Punjab police is not positioned in terms of resources or planning capability to meet the challenge of taking on the organized militant and extremist groups residing in Punjab.

As the military establishment prepares to (officially or unofficially) oversee the implementation of CPEC and its security, it is more than willing to step in and sideline what they perceive as an incompetent civilian political and security set up. This is a model the military has applied (via the paramilitary Rangers force) in Karachi. It is no surprise then that on April 18, security officials were quoted saying that the Punjab provincial government had initially been advised not to use local law enforcement in the Chotu gang operation and that they had demanded the official requisitioning of the Rangers by invoking a clause in the Anti-Terrorism Act. While the government refused this demand, arguing that it had the capacity to undertake such an operation, this may help explain as to why police chiefs were in a hurry to get the police action underway.

The dismal failure – inadequate preparation time notwithstanding – of a large police contingent in defeating the Chotu gang will only reinforce the image of incompetence. As the military seizes a greater role in policing activities, the hope the police will be allocated the necessary resources and training to undertake future operations shrinks. This will greatly impact Pakistan’s capability to combat the threat from radical militant groups operating in its heartland in the long run, simply because no amount of military firepower can replace continuous and effective local police activities.