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Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Slow Burn – Analysis

By Tushar Ranjan Mohanty

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At least 13 persons were killed and another 41 were injured when a suicide bomber blew himself up near the entrance of District and sessions court of Mardan District in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) on September 2, 2016. Four lawyers and three Policemen were among the dead. District Police Officer (DPO), Mardan, Faisal Shahzad said the attacker detonated a hand grenade before exploding his suicide vest. The bomb contained eight kilograms of explosive material, the DPO said, adding that security arrangements at the site of the attack helped mitigate the damage. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) splinter, Jama'at-ul-Ahrar (JuA), claimed responsibility for the attack.

If the suicide bomber had not been restricted at the security check point, the incident may well have been a replay of the August 8, 2016 Quetta Civil Hospital suicide attack, in which there were 55 lawyers among 74 people killed. The lawyer fraternity had gathered at the hospital to mourn the killing of Balochistan Bar Association (BBA) President Bilal Anwar Kasi in a gun attack earlier on August 8.

The Mardan court suicide attack comes just hours after terrorists of JuA attacked the Christian Colony in the Warsak Dam area of provincial capital Peshawar in the morning of September 2. One civilian, one Levies official and four suicide bombers were killed in an exchange of fire with Security Forces (SFs) in that incident. Two Frontier Corps (FC) personnel, a Policeman and two private guards sustained injuries in the attack. Firing reportedly began around 6 am (PST), when terrorists wearing suicide jackets attacked the colony. Two of the attackers detonated their suicide jackets, while the other two were killed by SFs. Director General (DG) of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Lieutenant General Asim Bajwa confirmed “all four suicide bombers were killed”.

The attacks in Peshawar and Mardan belied the Army’s ‘report card’, presented a day earlier, on the success of military operations against terrorists in the tribal areas of the country. On September 1, 2016, ISPR DG Bajwa had given an exhaustive rundown of the ‘progress’ made against terrorists in the tribal areas of country in Operation Zarb-e-Azb (Sword of the Prophet) which was launched in the North Waziristan Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) on June 15, 2014. He also highlighted that Pakistan had suffered a cumulative loss of USD 106.98 billion in the war on terror between 2001 and 2015. “We are not doing it for anyone but ourselves,” he stressed. He added, further, that 3,500 terrorists had been eliminated during the course of Operation Zarb-e-Azb, while 537 SF personnel were killed, including 18 officers, 35 junior commissioned officers and 484 soldiers; and another 2,272 soldiers sustained injures.

A comparative assessment of the first eight months of the current and previous year shows that the Army’s assessment of the prevailing security scenario in the Province is far from reality. Overall fatalities in KP have registered a 16.66 per cent increase in the first eight months of 2016 as compared to the previous year; from 138 killed in 2015 to 161 in 2016. Terrorist fatalities have, however, declined by 30 per cent, while fatalities among civilians registered a sharp 51.47 per cent increase. SF fatalities remained the same, at 30, in both years.

The Provincial Government, however, also claims considerable improvement over the first six months of 2016. According to a handout issued in a meeting to review efforts taken to combat terrorism, which was chaired by Inspector General of Police (IGP) Nasir Khan Durrani on July 12, 2016, there has been a considerable decrease in incidents of terrorism, including Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and firing incidents, from January to June in KP. There have been 99 incidents of terrorism during this period, whereas the number of terrorism related incidents reported in 2013, 2014 and 2015 were 281, 292 and 134, respectively. Senior Superintendents of Police (SSP)-Operations Abbas Majeed Marwat also asserted that the outgoing year saw a sudden decrease in murders, street crimes, extortion and other crimes in Peshawar, the provincial capital of KP. The SSP Operations claimed that in 2015, Peshawar saw 221 cases terrorism registered, while the number came down to 91 in the first six months of 2016, owing to

improved planning and Police operations in the city. According to official figures, more than 675 search and strike operations have been carried out in the urban and rural areas of the District during the course of seven months. 626 of these operations were in the January to June 16 period, during which 258 proclaimed offenders were arrested within the jurisdiction of 32 Police Stations. More than 15,000 arms and large quantities of ammunition were also seized across the city. These operations were categorized into three different types, according to SSP Operations Marwat: a total of 118 were conducted jointly with the Army; 124 were intelligence-based operations; and more than 365 were conducted solely by the Police. Some 4,000 places, including houses, hotels and hostels, were searched, resulting in the arrest of 3,287 suspects.

Nevertheless, there have been three major incidents in addition to the two on September 2, and the one on August 8, mentioned above, during this last eight months, undermining the Government's claim of dramatic success:

January 20: TTP terrorists stormed the Bacha Khan University in Charsadda District, KP, killing at least 21 persons and causing injuries to 35 others.

March 7: A teenage suicide bomber killed at least 17 people, including six women, two children and two Policemen, and injured 23, at a Court complex in Shabqadar tehsil (revenue unit) of Charsadda District in KP.

March 15: At least 15 persons were killed and 25 were injured when a powerful bomb ripped through a Civil Secretariat bus, carrying Government employees, near Sunehri Masjid in Peshawar.

Significantly, KP Police have been facing an acute shortage of officers, which has direct bearing on their fight against terrorism and militancy. According to an official statement issued in Peshawar on August 11, 2016, the Provincial Police had approached the Home and Tribal Affairs Department, KP, to meet the shortage so they could maintain the operational capability of units established to curb terrorism. The Province needs five Additional Inspectors General (AIGs), where only two are available at present. In the rank of Deputy Inspector General (DIG), only eight officers are presently working against 18 sanctioned posts. Similarly, against 35 sanctioned posts of SSPs, only 17 are presently available. The shortage of officers in the rank of SP is glaring, with 78 sanctioned posts, and only 57 available officers. Keeping in view the threats and recent terrorist attacks, KP Police have urged the Home and Tribal Affairs Department to approach the Federal Government to post Police Service of Pakistan (PSP) officers in the Province to meet the deficiency and cope with the challenges of terrorism.

KP Police has also suffered tremendous losses since terrorism took the Province in its iron grip in 2006. On August 4, 2016, Chief Minister Parvez Khattak disclosed that as many as 1,587 Policemen had lost their lives in suicide attacks, bomb blasts, ambushes, encounters, rocket and mortar barrages and other incidents, since 1970. Over 80 per cent of these fatalities were among the constabulary. During the last almost 46 years, one AIG (Safwat Ghayur); two DIGs (Malik Mohammad Saad and Abid Ali); seven Superintendents of Police (SPs); one Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP); 24 Deputy Superintendents of Police (DSP); as well as 25

Inspectors, 115 Sub Inspectors (SI), 131 Assistant Sub Inspectors (ASI), 148 head constables and 1,133 constables have been killed in the Province.

Casualties recorded a sudden increase after 2006, when terrorists spilled over to the settled Districts from FATA. According to official Police statistics, as many as 1,204 Policemen have been killed in attacks in KP since 2006 – 28 in 2006; 107 in 2007; 176 in 2008; 207 in 2009; 101 in 2010; 148 in 2011; 94 in 2012; 133 in 2013; 108 in 2014; and 60 in 2015. At least 42 Policemen have already been killed during the current year, till July 20, 2016. Peshawar tops the list among the 25 Districts of the Province, with over 340 Police casualties, followed by Swat where 123 Police officials have died. In Bannu, 120 personnel have lost their lives, while 100 have died in Dera Ismail Khan.

After nearly a decade of counter-terrorism operations, including more than two continuous years of Zarb-e-Azb, the threat of terrorism persists, claiming increasing numbers of civilian lives and a continuing toll of SF personnel as well. Terrorism and the state's responses have destroyed all semblances of normalcy and security in KP, even as the Province and its neighbouring FATA region remains the core launching grounds of Pakistan's terrorist campaigns in Afghanistan through its proxies, prominently including the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. Pakistan's persistent duplicity and its consequent blowback remain the principal dynamic creating spaces for terrorism across borders in South Asia.

* Tushar Ranjan Mohanty
Research Associate, Institute for Conflict Management

SATP, or the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) publishes the South Asia Intelligence Review, and is a product of The Institute for Conflict Management, a non-Profit Society set up in 1997 in New Delhi, and which is committed to the continuous evaluation and resolution of problems of internal security in South Asia. The Institute was set up on the initiative of, and is presently headed by, its President, Mr. K.P.S. Gill, IPS (Retd).