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## Pakistan attack a warning to anti-Taliban tribes

IJAZ MOHAMMED and NAHAL TOOSI

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A northwest Pakistani village that tried to resist Taliban infiltration mourned on Saturday the victims of an apparent revenge suicide bombing that killed 96 residents during a volleyball game.

The attack on the outskirts of Lakki Marwat city was one of the deadliest in recent Pakistani history and sent a bloody New Year's message to Pakistanis who dare take on the armed Islamist extremists. As villagers in Shah Hasan Khel held funeral services and rescuers searched rubble for more bodies, many in the area were too terrified to speculate on who staged the assault.

The suicide bomber detonated some 550 pounds (250 kilograms) of high-intensity explosives on the crowded field in the village during a volleyball tournament held Friday near a meeting of anti-Taliban elders. The elders, who had helped set up an anti-Taliban militia in the area, were probably the actual target, police said.

Lakki Marwat district is near South Waziristan, a tribal region where the army has been battling the Pakistani Taliban since October.

The military operation was undertaken with the backing of the U.S., which is eager for Pakistan to free its tribal belt of militants believed to be involved in attacks on Western troops in Afghanistan. The offensive has provoked apparent reprisal attacks that had already killed more than 500 people in Pakistan before Friday's blast.

Militants have struck all across the nuclear-armed country, and they appear increasingly willing to hit groups beyond security forces. No group claimed responsibility for Friday's blast, but that is not uncommon when many civilians are killed.

Across Pakistan's northwest, where the police force is thin, underpaid and under-equipped, various tribes have taken security into their own hands over the past two years by setting up citizen militias to fend off the Taliban.

The government has encouraged such "lashkars," and in some areas they have proven key to reducing militant activity.

Still, tribal leaders who face off with the militants do so at high personal risk. Several suicide attacks have targeted meetings of anti-Taliban elders, and militants also often go after individuals. One reason militancy has spread in Pakistan's semiautonomous tribal belt is because insurgents have slain dozens of tribal elders and filled a power vacuum.

Shah Hasan Khel village "has been a hub of militants. Locals set up a militia and expelled the militants from this area. This attack seems to be reaction to their expulsion," local police Chief Ayub Khan told reporters.

Footage on private TV channels showed villagers gathered Saturday to say funeral prayers as covered bodies lay before them. Piles of beige mud-bricks were nearby, what was left of some three dozen homes toppled by the massive blast.

Mohammed Qayyum, 22, tried to avoid crying Saturday as he recounted how his younger brother died when the explosion shook the neighborhood. His family's house was damaged.

"After the blast, I heard cries, I saw dust, and I saw injured and dead bodies," said Qayyum, who escaped injury. "See this rubble, see these destroyed homes? Everybody was happy before the explosion, but today we are mourning."

Like many others in the village that had prided itself on standing up to the militants, Qayyum refused to comment when asked who he thought was behind the bombing.

Mahmood Shah, a former security chief for Pakistan's tribal regions, described the attack as a big blow to Pakistanis resisting the Taliban, but noted past militant strikes had not stymied the resistance.

"I'm sure that even with this blow it will not make much difference to the resolve of the people to fight the war on terrorism with their own means," Shah said.

In Washington, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton condemned the attack.

"The United States will continue to stand with the people of Pakistan in their efforts to chart their own future free from fear and intimidation and will support their efforts to combat violent extremism and bolster democracy," she said in a statement.

Authorities said about 300 people were on the field at the time of Friday's blast and security had been provided for the games and the tribal elders' meeting. Local administrator Asmatullah Khan said Saturday that 90 bodies had been identified, while six remained unknown. Thirty-six people were being treated at nearby medical centers.

Eight children, six paramilitary troops and two police were among the dead, police said.

Omar Gull, 35, a wounded paramilitary soldier, said the attacker drove recklessly into the crowd and people were trying to figure out what was happening when the explosives detonated. "It was then chaos," he said.

The attack was one of the deadliest in years, and the second deadliest since the latest wave of bloodshed began in October. A car bomb killed 112 people at a crowded market in Peshawar on Oct. 28.

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani vowed Saturday to defeat militants, saying "the agenda of terrorists is to destabilize the country, to create panic and spread fear."