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afgazad@gmail.com

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The Globe and Mail

Attacks show Pakistan's Taliban are far from defeated

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After a lull in the violence, extremists in Pakistan struck back this week with six attacks, the worst of them a bombing in a market in the eastern city of Lahore Friday that killed at least 45 people.

On Saturday, a suicide bomber driving a motorized rickshaw blew himself up at a security checkpoint in northwestern Pakistan, killing at least 13 people and injuring 52, officials and a doctor said, underscoring the relentless security threat to the nation.

Friday's attack, the bloodiest terrorist strike in Pakistan this year, saw two attackers, on foot and wearing suicide jackets, detonate themselves in a busy market inside a high-security military district in Lahore. The target appeared to be a convoy of military vehicles but most of the victims were civilians. More than 100 people were wounded.

After darkness fell, a series of six back-to-back smaller blasts, possibly caused by grenades, spread panic in a residential neighbourhood in another part of the city. The aim appeared to be to cause alarm rather than destruction.

After provoking a fierce reaction initially, Pakistan's military offensives against the Taliban last year ultimately appeared to substantially diminish the ability of the extremists to carry out terrorist attacks. With yesterday's incident in Lahore that achievement has been called into question, though the operation was a relatively unsophisticated bombing compared to the commando-style assaults against fortified targets seen last year.

“What is clear, even now, is that the Pakistani Taliban will continue to carry out attacks until Pakistani security forces – which have demonstrated considerable progress in the last 10 months – are able to inflict debilitating damage on the jihadist rebel network in the country,” said Stratfor, a private U.S.-based intelligence firm, in a report.

Lahore is the bustling cultural hub of Pakistan and the capital of Punjab province, Pakistan's most densely populated area and its political heartland. It was the second bombing this week in the city, following the car bombing on Monday of a police interrogation centre that killed 14 people.

Other attacks this week included a gun and grenade assault on a U.S. Christian aid agency's office in the North-West Frontier Province that killed six of its staff, all Pakistani nationals.

“They [the extremists] are trying to project their power, telling the government that they are still alive,” said analyst Imtiaz Gul. “They are still far from broken. It’s going to be a long haul.”

It was in 2009 that Lahore was fully dragged into the bloody insurgency in Pakistan with a series of spectacular attacks, including a gun assault on the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team. The last major attack in Lahore was in December, when a market was bombed, killing at least 49 people.

The authorities regularly assert that the Taliban and other extremist groups have been smashed as a result of recent military operations, a claim repeated Friday.

“We broke their networks,” said Rana Sanaullah, Pakistan’s Provincial Law Minister. “That's why they have not been able to strike for a considerable time.”

Even as Pakistan’s military has moved against them, however, Pakistani Taliban from the North-West Frontier Province have joined forces with militant groups from the Punjab, all closely allied to al-Qaeda, to form a nexus that can strike anywhere. Many of the attacks claimed by the Taliban are thought to have been carried out by these other groups, such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. And while there has been concerted action against the Taliban, the Punjabi groups have been left relatively untouched, which appears to be the big flaw in Pakistan’s counter-terror strategy.

The big jihadist groups operating in mainstream Pakistan, including Sipah-e-Sahaba, an arm of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi; Jaish-e-Mohammad, based in the southern Punjabi city of Bahawalpur; and Lashkar-e-Taiba, the group blamed for the 2008 Mumbai attacks, continue to operate largely unimpeded. The police and military have instead concentrated on more radical splinter groups from the big extremist groups, without going after the parent organizations.