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## Militants give bloody show of strength

By Syed Saleem Shahzad  
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KARACHI - Up to 20 suspected al-Qaeda-led militants, wearing police uniforms, stormed a police training camp in the eastern city of Lahore on Monday morning, killing at least 70 men and injuring scores more. The heavily armed gunmen then took hundreds of cadets hostage, who were still being held after more than six hours.

Militants sources confirmed to Asia Times Online that the raid was the first major operation of the new nexus comprising al-Qaeda, Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud and Punjabi militants. They are angered by the agreement between Pakistan and the United States to hunt for top al-Qaeda and Taliban figures, as well as Pakistani militants, inside Pakistan.

The attack perfectly underscores the words of United States President Barack Obama, who on Friday, in outlining a new strategy for Afghanistan, stressed that containing militancy in Pakistan would be a focal point in the implementation of the initiative.

Reacting to Monday's attack, unlike with previous incidents in which foreign agencies were blamed, Pakistani defense analysts admitted that home-grown militants trained in the Afghan jihad were responsible.

Much of Obama's new strategy for "increasingly perilous" Afghanistan focuses on Pakistan, which will have US economic aid tripled to US\$1.5 billion annually. But while Pakistan is seen as the key to eliminating the leadership of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Islamabad has been warned that the offer of aid is not unconditional. After years of mixed results, the US is no longer prepared to offer a "blank check".

In his speech outlining the new strategy - which will see an extra 4,000 US troops deployed to train the Afghan army - Obama declared the opening of a new front (Pakistan) in the post-September 11, 2001, US-led war in Afghanistan.

Top-level Pakistani intelligence quarters confirmed to Asia Times Online that this was agreed on during the recent visit to Washington by Pakistani army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani and also when the US Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA's) director Leon Panetta's visited Islamabad. At these meetings, all possible targets were discussed, with specifications and a *modus operandi* finalized.

It is in reaction to this agreement that Monday's attack in Lahore took place, illustrating in blood how difficult it will be to contain the problem of militancy. This has a direct bearing on Afghanistan as militants use Pakistan as a base for operations across the border. In Washington, the most important aspect of the new strategy is to contain the Taliban's central command, which operates on both sides of the border. All other steps, including the deployment of 17,000 additional troops to bring the US force to 65,000, are peripheral.

The rationale of the strategy is based on the fact that following the US invasion of Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, the Taliban's command structure was destroyed. Despite having several hundred thousand fighters, the Taliban rank and file were rendered ineffective, apart from sporadic attacks in Gardez province in April 2002 and at a few other places.

The insurgency, which lacked resources and leadership, was thus not a serious threat for the coalition troops in Afghanistan until towards the end of 2003. US intelligence also managed to woo several top leaders of the former Taliban regime. These included commander Mullah Abdul Salam Rocketi, former foreign minister Abdul Wakeel Mutawakil and former deputy interior minister and a commander, Abdul Razzaq, who later returned to the Taliban.

It was estimated that after the parliamentary elections of 2005, Taliban leader Mullah Omar and his close colleagues and al-Qaeda would be alienated and Washington would be able to strike deals with the "moderate" Taliban who had gained representation in parliament against Mullah Omar's orders. With a pro-Western government in place, a time frame could then be set for the US's exit.

However, several events took place which the US blamed on Pakistan - and even presented Islamabad evidence to this effect. These derailed the American plans.

On the fateful evening of April 19, 2003, the Hezb-e-Islami (HIA) leadership congregated in Shamshatoo camp in Peshawar, the capital of North-West Frontier Province in Pakistan. The HIA is an Islamic organization with its roots in the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s.

The chief of the then-military wing of the HIA, Khalid Farooqui, now a member of parliament in Afghanistan, announced that a jihad would be waged against foreign troops in Afghanistan. The CIA presented photographs of the meeting to Pakistani authorities and complained that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence had facilitated the whole show. One picture showed HIA leader Qutubuddin Hilal at the meeting. According to Pakistan, he was under house arrest at his Peshawar residence.

Proof was also presented of the opening of HIA offices in the southern Pakistani port city of Karachi and in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province. These were to recruit Afghan youths from the refugee camps to fight in Afghanistan.

However, the biggest American complaint was about the base of legendary Afghan mujahideen leader Jalaluddin Haqqani, in Dande Darpa Khail in the North Waziristan tribal

area on the border with Afghanistan. The Americans rightly felt that one day his camp would play a decisive role in the Taliban-led insurgency. They were dead right. In 2006, Mullah Omar appointed Haqqani his deputy and central military commander and the wily fighter was pivotal in helping the Taliban regroup, culminating in their successful spring offensive in 2006.

The Obama administration now wants to revisit the days when the Taliban were effectively without a clear leadership. The additional troops aim to clear the Taliban's sanctuaries in Logar and Wardak provinces around Kabul. But the real goal is to shoot down the Taliban's command and control structures, which would, as before, force the Taliban fighters to melt into the population.

Washington apparently believes this campaign will take a few years, but that signs of success could emerge from this year if the plan is strictly implemented. This is where Pakistan comes in, and Obama's concern that the country get fully behind the US.

During his meetings with US officials, Kiani was briefed that intelligence-sharing needed to be of the highest level, including on all suspects, whether Afghans or Pakistanis. At the top of the list are anti-Pakistan tribal warlord Baitullah Mehsud, Sirajuddin Haqqani - Jalaluddin's son, Mullah Omar and other senior Taliban figures, such as Mullah Bradar, Mullah Abdul Razzaq and Mullah Hasan Rahmani.

Last week, a CIA Predator drone attacked Makeen, the native town and headquarters of Mehsud in North Waziristan. Subsequently, the US placed a US\$5 million ransom on his head - the first time it has done this for a Pakistani national. This happened even though Mehsud renounced violence against the Pakistani security forces after the Swat peace agreement this month. He instead will focus on foreign forces in Afghanistan. The attack on Mehsud's headquarters broke the ceasefire and a new wave of suicide attacks on the security forces has played havoc in North-West Frontier Province in the past few days.

Monday's assault on the police training camp extends the battlefield into urban areas.

### **On the trail of Mullah Omar**

Apart from top al-Qaeda leaders, the big fish remain Mullah Omar, the biggest Taliban commander in southwestern Afghanistan, Mullah Bradar, and other Taliban leaders of the Kandahar clan. This clan hails from the region stretching from the Pakistani province of Balochistan to the Afghan provinces of Helmand, Orzgan, Kandahar and Zabul.

Their termination would likely mean the end of the Taliban movement and the beginning of an era in which Washington believes that a Western-friendly Afghan government with deep roots in the southern Afghan Pashtun tribes would emerge.

Intelligence-sharing between Pakistan and the US has resulted in the areas of Noshki, Loralai, Zhob and Pashin in Pakistan being identified as places where the Taliban's command council meets. The precise nature of the Intelligence-sharing is not known, but it could be similar to what Pakistan has applied in the tribal areas.

Militant sources have told Asia Times Online of the case of Asmatullah Wazir, who was an assistant political agent in North Waziristan, that is, Islamabad's man. He was abducted by the Taliban from the town of Mir Ali last December and grilled on the state's spying network

in the tribal area.

Asmatullah gave 50 names of people who were receiving money on the instructions of military quarters from Islamabad. According to the militants, Asmatullah maintained that this proxy network in North Waziristan informed Pakistan about any specific al-Qaeda person, and that information was shared with the CIA. Drones would then be launched into action. In this case, the Taliban killed all of the informers, mostly Afghans, and Asmatullah was released in January.

In a similar manner, Pakistan is likely to try to infiltrate the tribal areas in Balochistan province, where a new hunt for militants is to be launched.

But nagging doubts remain over Pakistan's commitment to this plan, despite Obama's specific caution that any aid the country receives will be based on performance. Should the Taliban be successfully "decapitated", beyond the US, it would mean a victory for countries such as India, Iran and Russia, with Pakistan being sidelined in its own strategic back yard.

A recent incident underscores the US's concerns. With Pakistan's assistance, a drone attack helped eliminate several top Arab al-Qaeda militants, but when it came to cooperation on some Taliban leaders, the Pakistanis were found wanting.

On the CIA's insistence, Pakistan shared intelligence on Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin and drones were deployed in Dande Darpa Khail, with repeated attacks in a single day. Several women and children of the Haqqani family were killed. But the CIA later complained that on the day the intelligence was shared, both Jalaluddin and Sirajuddin were in Peshawar, and another son, Nasiruddin, was in Karachi.

A complicating factor is the phenomenon of the neo-Taliban - a new generation of Afghans and Pakistanis, Pashtun and non-Pashtun Taliban imbued with al-Qaeda's ideology. Three years ago they were so few in number they did not warrant discussion. Now they number about 100,000, if not more.

In principle, there is now agreement between Pakistan and the US to eliminate all terror, irrespective of nationality. This is why Mehsud was targeted. A new operation by the Pakistani military is also planned in Mohmand Agency. However, the neo-Taliban's leadership is well beyond Mehsud, meaning that even if the Taliban leadership in southwestern Afghanistan were contained, the neo-Taliban would remain a big factor.

Further, after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, dozens of Arabs moved to Iraq and fueled the al-Qaeda-led insurgency. The US succeeded in alienating al-Qaeda, after which many Arabs moved to Pakistan's tribal areas. This trend was first observed in the last months of 2008, and is expected to continue. In sum, the Obama administration analyzed the situation in the perspective of the US success in the few years following 2001, as well as the success against al-Qaeda in Iraq from 2007-2008.

The neo-Taliban, with their ability to stage suicide attacks at will, are the most underestimated factor in this whole game, which means that the fight is far from over: witness Monday's carnage in Lahore.