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Pakistan braces for more attacks

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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A day after militants stormed a police academy in the eastern city of Lahore, security officials on Tuesday were still trying to make sense of conflicting details of the brazen operation. But on one issue there is consensus - more attacks are expected on high-profile targets, such as military installations, jails, the presidency and even parliament.

A group of militants once associated with the Harkat-e-Jihad-i-Islami and the Lashkar-e-Taiba - groups with strong roots to the struggle over divided Kashmir - a few days ago traveled to Lahore from a militant camp in the North Waziristan town of Razmak, a year-round hill station situated at the crossroads of North Waziristan and South Waziristan on the Afghanistan border.

According to militant contacts who spoke to Asia Times Online, after surveying a few potential targets, the militants selected the police training center for the attack on Monday morning. Several of the main gunmen were dressed in police uniforms, backed by juniors to provide them with cover.

After killing a number of cadets and taking many others hostage, the lead militants slipped away from the scene, leaving behind a few men to keep the shootout with security forces going, which they did for eight hours. The fugitives most likely went to southern Punjab cities, such as Multan.

These are the bare facts, all others, including the number of cadet casualties - anywhere from eight to 60 - the number of militants and how many of them were killed or captured remain guesswork.

Pakistani security forces claim to have killed four militants and captured four. But the Deputy Inspector General Operations (Punjab), Mushtaq Sukhaira, officially confirmed the arrest of only one person. He was named only as Hijratullah, an Afghan national from Paktika province, and was caught with a few grenades and a dagger. He is said to have been living in

North Waziristan and does not speak Pakistani Urdu or Punjabi languages. In light of statements made by some cadets, intelligence agencies maintain that some of the militants came from Pakistani Punjab and spoke three languages - Urdu, Punjabi and Seraiki. (Seraiki is spoken in southern Punjab.)

Hijratullah is being held at a secret location for interrogation by a Pakistani joint investigation team comprising the Intelligence Bureau, Military Intelligence and Inter-Services Intelligence.

On Tuesday, according to a Reuters report, the chief of the Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan), Baitullah Mehsud, claimed responsibility for Monday's attack. "Yes, we have carried out this attack," Mehsud is reported to have said. He is based in South Waziristan and is traditionally anti-Pakistan. He added that the attack was "in retaliation for the continued [Predator] drone strikes by the US in collaboration with Pakistan on our people" and that the attacks would continue "until the Pakistan government stops supporting the Americans".

Militant blowback

The latest attack, and most likely the one on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore earlier this month, mark ominous muscle-flexing by Pakistan's "original" jihadis, mostly Punjabis trained by the military in the 1990s as the first line of defense for the country, especially in Kashmir.

After the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, they stayed neutral, only joining the Taliban's fight against foreign forces in Afghanistan in 2004, helping with training and logistics. During the Pakistani military's operations in the tribal areas over the past few years, they kept out of the fight. (See ['Pain has become the remedy'](#) Asia Times Online, November 14, 2007.)

In a critical phase of the "war on terror", for the first time these militants are fully operational and are turning their attention to operations inside Pakistan. The top military brains at General Headquarters in Rawalpindi, the garrison city twinned with the capital Islamabad, are acutely aware of what these highly trained and dedicated militants are capable of: they cut their teeth in operations inside India and in Indian-administered Kashmir.

Dealing with the problem is another matter. To start with, unprecedented pressure from the United States has forced Pakistan to sever communication with the militants.

US Central Command chief General David Petraeus, speaking on US television on Monday, reiterated that the US military was putting additional focus on rooting out ties between Pakistan's intelligence services and the Taliban. He continued, "The US military will reserve the right of last resort to take out threats inside Pakistan, but it would prefer to enable the Pakistani military to do the job itself."

After the attack on the Sri Lankan team, Pakistani military officials met with Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, the chief of the Jamaatut Dawa, which is linked to the Lashkar-e-Taiba, as well as the commander-in-chief of the Lashkar-e-Taiba, Zakiur Rahman Lakhvi. They asked the men, both of whom are under house arrest, to use their influence to get the militants to agree to a ceasefire.

But Saeed and Lakhvi said they no longer had influence, and that if they ventured into North Waziristan it was most likely they would be captured or killed by the militants as they were

now seen as Islamabad's proxies.

"This is an attack on Pakistan. There are two choices: to either let the Taliban take over your country or to fight it out," said Rehman Malik, Pakistan's Interior ministry chief.

But this new breed of "renegade" militants, broken free from their former masters, poses a formidable new threat, and the authorities are braced for more attacks sooner rather than later.