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Tribal-area-style operation not possible in Pakistan's Punjab

By Imdad Hussain

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The nexus between the Tehrek-e- Taliban Pakistan(TTP) and Punjabi Taliban is attracting attention at national and international scene but tribal-area-style operation against the militants in eastern Pakistan's Punjab province is not possible, Pakistani analysts said Sunday.

The TTP-Punjabi Taliban nexus becomes a hot discussion when some militants attacked two worship places of a minority sect in the Punjabi capital city of Lahore, killing more than 90 people and injuring over 100 during Friday prayers. It was the biggest sectarian violence in Pakistan in years.

After visiting the terror-stricken mosques on Sunday, Pakistani Interior Minister Rehman Malik said that the terrorists from southern Punjab have come on surface and the government will eliminate them soon.

The government of Punjab, the largest province and the heartland of Pakistan, said that the attackers were trained in northwest Pakistan's tribal areas, adjacent to the Afghan border, and blamed them for linking with Pakistani Taliban TTP.

A section in the society believed that the fresh development could trigger operation in the eastern province as operation against militancy is going on in the northwest. But situation in Punjab is different from the one existing in the bordering areas with Afghanistan.

In Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), TTP is influential and has claimed control over certain areas like South Waziristan, Bajaur or in settled areas like Swat. But in Punjab where militants cannot control a particular area, they are scattered and operate as small groups of few individuals, experts said.

Recently, the interior minister said that Punjabi Taliban have links with TTP and the militants, after defeat in northwest, have changed their method. He blamed Punjab-based militants for helping TTP.

Two high-ranking members of Punjabi Taliban, Iqbal and Gul Muhammad, were arrested in 2009. They were accused of acting as coordinators between militants from the east and main TTP leadership. "Dr. Usman," another militant, was arrested allegedly in connection to October 2009 attack on Pakistan's army headquarters. In another incident the acting Amir of the outlawed Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) Qari Zafar was believed to be perished in a U.S. drone strike in North Waziristan tribal area in February.

The suicide bombing in Lahore on March 8, which killed at least 11 people in attacks on the office of Pakistan's investigation agency, was allegedly carried out by the Punjab-based militants to avenge the killing of Commander Qari Zafar. On March 13, at least 45 people including 9 soldiers were killed and around 100 injured in twin suicide attacks in Lahore.

Last year, a visiting cricket team of Sri Lanka and a police training school were both attacked in the same province.

Pakistan has said it would not accept dictation as far as operations in the country are concerned, but now the international community has another reason for motivating Pakistan to take actions against militants, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Jammat-ud-Dawa and others, in the eastern part of the country.

The United States also aims at improvement of Pakistan-India relations and wishes for operation in Pakistan's eastern part, observers said.

But geographical location and ground realities are different in the eastern part as compared to the northwestern part.

Rahimullah Yousafzai, an analyst on militancy, told Xinhua that how Pakistan can concentrate on militancy in its eastern part as war against militants is continuing on several fronts in western and northern parts of the country. Only police or intelligence operations against dispersed small militants groups in Punjab is possible, he said.

Security analyst Salim Safi agreed with Yousafzai, saying that unlike tribal areas and parts of northwest Pakistan, militants in eastern part have no declared stronghold nor can they control areas in the major cities of Punjab. So intelligence or police operations are sufficient, he said.

Safi said that Punjabi Taliban refers to some groups having links with the TTP, however, the latter has no organizational structure in Punjab.

But why Punjab has become restive as, unlike FATA, it does not border Afghanistan where war against al-Qaeda and its allies is going on?

Defense analyst Brigadier Mehmood Shah told Xinhua that after successful operations in northwest Pakistan the militants in the areas were dispersed. Now some segmented groups have existence in Punjab but they have no central command or a center in a particular area.

Observers maintained that until 2006, militants in eastern and western parts of Pakistan had different agendas as Taliban in northwest region focused on fighting international and Afghan forces in Afghanistan, and other Western targets in Pakistan, while Punjab-based militant groups such as Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and Jaish-i-Muhammad were focusing on the Indian troops in the Muslim-majority and India-administered Kashmir, a historical disputed area between India and Pakistan.

After 2007, the region witnessed several changes and Punjab-based militants started developing links with the Taliban in northwestern part of Pakistan especially in tribal areas, they said.

Following the Pakistani military operation against Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad in mid-2007, agendas of all the militant groups in Pakistan seemed same, observers said.

Researcher Raheel Khan maintained that the mosque was operated by Maulana Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid Ghazi, both strong supporters of the Taliban and Islamist movements, adding that the Punjab-based militant groups, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and Jaysh-i-Muhammad and others, were associated with Lal Masjid, and some of their members turned against the state after the siege.

Mariana Baabar, an expert on international affairs, said that Pakistan is being demanded to eliminate all the militants but Pakistan also blames other countries for proxies, so all proxies should come to end.

An ordinary police officer can control the militants in Punjab and no large-scale military operation is needed, she concluded.