

PAKISTAN FACING DIFFICULT CHOICE: PEACE TALKS OR MILITARY ACTION?

With mounting pressure from many sides, Pakistan is quickly approaching a decision point at which it must choose whether it prefers to pursue peace talks with militant groups or to take military action against them. The latest spectacular incident involved a splinter group of Pakistan's Taliban executing 23 Pakistani Frontier Corpsmen who had been in custody since being captured in 2010. This killing has caused at least a temporary pause in the ongoing peace talks between representatives of the TTP and Pakistan's government.

The Express Tribune brings us word of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's reaction to the executions:

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on Monday condemned the execution of kidnapped soldiers by a Taliban faction, warning that the deaths could affect ongoing peace talks.

"Such incidents have an extremely negative impact on the ongoing dialogue aimed at promoting peace," Nawaz said in a statement issued by his office.

A faction of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from the northwestern Mohmand district claimed on Sunday night that they had killed 23 paramilitary Frontier Corps members who were kidnapped in June 2010.

Sharif goes on to note that this is just the latest attempt to disrupt the peace talks:

Nawaz added that Pakistan "cannot afford such bloodshed" and lamented that

previous attempts to start dialogue were “sabotaged whenever it reached an encouraging stage”.

So while this disruption of the talks is clearly the responsibility of the Mohmand splinter group of the TTP that carried out the executions, recall that the US disrupted the talks last November with a drone killing of the TTP leader the day before talks were to begin.

In its coverage of the executions, Dawn notes the decision that Pakistan faces:

Highly placed sources have said the military was prepared to launch a full scale operation against militant sanctuaries in North Waziristan.

Sources said the army was awaiting a green signal from the government, adding that a large number of troops were being dispatched to North Waziristan from various formations across the country.

Meanwhile, army formations were carrying out field firing and battle inoculation exercises which are being regarded as preparations of a possible operation.

The exercises were aimed as practice for troops in operating under real battlefield environment with live firing of various weapon systems, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said.

Meanwhile, those who have been appointed to the negotiating group on behalf of the TTP are doing their best to get the talks going again.

Sadly, though, violent pressure on Pakistan’s government is continuing on many more fronts. The dean of medicine at the University of Karachi was killed today in an incident that has the hallmarks of a targeted killing, with four gunmen on two motorcycles attacking his car.

Peshawar (the capital city of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

province, which borders on the tribal regions where many terrorists find safe haven) has been especially hard-hit with violence. Cinemas there have been closed since last week due to terrorist attacks and today at least 13 children were injured in a bomb blast. In an additional very interesting development, a high-ranking member of Afghanistan's Taliban was assassinated today:

Afghan Taliban leader Maulvi Abdul Raqib was shot dead in Peshawar on Monday, *Express News* reported.

Raqib is not the only recent victim in Pakistan related to Afghanistan's Taliban. The article continues:

In December last year, a senior Afghan Taliban commander Noorullah Hotak was shot dead in Quetta by unidentified gunmen.

Earlier, senior Haqqani Network leader Dr Nasiruddin Haqqani was shot dead near Islamabad on November 10, 2013.

On November 21, Maulvi Ahmad Jan of the Haqqani Network was killed in a US Drone strike in Hangu.

And if those issues are not enough challenges for Pakistan, Iran is now raising the stakes in their warnings about steps they are willing to take to rescue the five Iranian border guards that were kidnapped and taken into Pakistan by Jeish Al-Adl:

Abdulreza Rahmani Fazli [Iran's Minister of the Interior] told reporters today that Iran would enter Pakistani soil if Pakistan did not act properly about the terrorist groups kidnapping and killing Iran's border guards. "We had regular sessions with officials from ministries of foreign affairs and intelligence and diplomatic actions are underway in the

ministry of foreign affairs," told Fazli to reporters, and that "so far, we had 3 meetings with Pakistani border officials, and a session is scheduled also for today."

Fazli maintained that in any event that harmed Iranian border guards taken hostage, Iran would enter Pakistani border to act on its own. "Pakistan and Afghanistan have been saved havens for terrorist groups and international gangs, so we see sometimes sabotage in our border with these two countries," added the minister. "We have demanded Pakistan to provide security of its borders. We save the right to intervene for ourselves in the event that Pakistan does not act to secure borders," he added.

Sharif certainly has his hands full this week.