

BROAD RESPONSE BY PAKISTAN TO PESHAWAR SCHOOL ATTACK



Pakistan's army chief General Raheel Sharif meeting with Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani on December 17 to discuss cooperation in fighting terror. (ISPR photo)

The deadly attack by Pakistan's Taliban, the TTP, against a school in Peshawar on Tuesday has prompted a huge and sweeping response in Pakistan and beyond. Perhaps most significantly, Pakistan's army chief, General Raheel Sharif, went to Kabul the very next day:

General Raheel Sharif, Chief of Army staff today visited Afghanistan and held separate meetings with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and General John F Campbell, ISAF commander. Matters related to security situation along Pak-Afghan border region came under discussion. Vital elements of intelligence were shared with concerned authorities, with regard to Peshawar incident. Afghan President assured

General Raheel Sharif that Afghan soil will not be allowed for terrorists activities against Pakistan and any signature found in this regard will be immediately eliminated.

COAS also assured Afghan President full support to the Unity government in all spheres including joint efforts against terrorists.

ISAF commander also assured of its complete support in eliminating terrorist in his area of responsibility.

Pakistan and Afghanistan have long been at odds about Taliban factions within each country using it as a haven from which to attack the other. ToloNews reports on the potential for the Peshawar attack to change this relationship:

Following his visit, General Sharif said that the Afghan president and ISAF commander assured him that the Taliban would not be allowed to use Afghan soil as a launching pad for attacks on Pakistan, exposing the simmering distrust that remains between the sides after 13 years of war. The general's comments come after Afghan and NATO coalition leaders have for years pleaded with the Pakistani government to do more to keep the Taliban from using the tribal belt as a safe haven for recruiting fighters and launching attacks into Afghanistan.

But after the Tuesday's deadly attack by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) on a military-run school in Peshawar, it is possible the Pakistani armed forces and civilian government in Islamabad are more inclined to crack down on terrorism and seek help in doing so than ever before. A number of security analysts have encouraged that view, arguing that Afghanistan and Pakistan should come

together and establish a joint counter-terrorism task force.

Other steps that Pakistan has taken have been swift. Military courts for trial of terrorism suspects are being established and Pakistan's moratorium on the death penalty for terrorism offenses has been lifted. Six executions are expected within the next 24 hours. In choosing to move forward with military courts, I guess Pakistan is overlooking the horrible track record in the US for military commissions at Guantanamo when compared to trying terror suspects in criminal court.

Pakistan's military action against terrorists launched in June, Zarb-e-Azb, is being expanded, with attacks now taking place outside the tribal areas. But it is not just Pakistan's military that is expanding its activity outside the tribal area. A drone strike today took place right on the Afghan border with Pakistan, just outside Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. US drone strikes in Pakistan have been almost exclusively in the tribal region, so an attack right on the border of another province is rare. Dawn reports that the attack targeted those believed to be responsible for the Peshawar attack:

Intelligence sources said the drone targeted a militant compound in Cort Village of Nazyan, completely destroying the compound. Aside from the eight dead, scores of others were reportedly injured on the zero line, which has been serving as a safe haven for the Mullah Fazllullah led Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

According to security officials, militants based in the Nazyan district had planned the devastating attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar, which left over 140 children and teachers dead and scores injured.

Gosh, I wonder who might have been the target of that attack? Check this out:

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, while chairing a meeting on the country's internal security at General Headquarters (GHQ), was informed about the army and Isaf's decision to target Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan chief Maulvi Fazlullah, sources told The Express Tribune on Friday.

Fazlullah was reportedly in contact with the Peshawar school attackers from Afghanistan during the assault which left 141 people, mostly school children, dead on December 16.

"Although Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif and DG ISI Rizwan Akhter have provided audio proof of attackers talking to Fazlullah during the assault, Army is currently refraining from chasing targets across the international border," the sources said. The audio recording, handed to Afghan authorities, was in Pashto.

Further, sources said, the military leadership and Isaf agreed to target Fazlullah in a drone attack rather than a ground operation in the Nanger Har, Nooristan and Kunar areas of Afghanistan, where Fazlullah is believed to be taking sanctuary.

Aside from the military response, however, it appears that police work is having some success in tracking the attack:

At least four suspects, including a woman, were arrested from southern Punjab's Hasilpur area in connection with Tuesday's carnage in Peshawar that claimed the lives of more than 140 people, DawnNews reported.

The four were tracked through a mobile SIM which was reportedly used by

terrorists during the attack on the military-run Army Public School. The SIM was registered in the name of the woman who was taken into custody along with three others from Gharibabad area of Hasilpur, a city in the district of Bahawalpur.

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Dawn's report on the Peshawar attack had quoted a senior military official as saying that militants had been in direct communication with their handler in Afghanistan, Umar Naray, alias Umar Khalifa Adinzai – a well-known commander of the TTP's Tariq Geedar group. "He was directing the suicide bombers and the attack group," the official had said.

Gosh, those militants spent a lot of time on the phone during their attack if they spoke with both Naray and Fazlullah. Note also that these arrests were a long way from Peshawar and the Afghan border area where the drone strike took place.