



In This Issue

- 2 terrorists including 'high-value target' killed in Dera Ismail Khan operation
- Education – A Shield against Crime
- Notes from a former police chief: Battling violence during Pakistan election
- 24 terrorists killed in operations in Balochistan's Mach, Kolpur over last three days
- 10 cops martyred, 6 injured in attack on DI Khan police station
- 2 militants killed in North Waziristan IBO
- An ever-evolving terrorism threat
- 2 terrorists killed in intelligence-based operation in KP's Mardan
- Election Policing Dilemma
- 1 cop martyred, 3 injured in exchange of fire with terrorists in Mardan



Policing through cultural sensitivities

DY SYED KALEEM IMAM

The now famous story of police officer Syeda Shehrbano Naqvi deserves praise. Her efforts last week averted a grave tragedy over a woman's dress adorned with Arabic lettering, which a frenzied crowd in Lahore's Ichhra Bazar mistook for holy verse. The officer's actions during an extremely volatile situation provided an example of good policing that the community will cherish for a long time. It is hoped that it will become the standard response for police when faced with similar situations.

In the past, law enforcement, in general, has cut a sorry figure when facing off against religious zealots. Few alert officers have dared to do the right thing in difficult situations, while most have responded feebly. Dozens of lynchings have occurred while the police have stood by, watching helplessly. Even in cases where miscreants have been apprehended, most have been jailed only on flimsy charges, so they may easily walk again.

Even this time, the self-righteous vigilantes of Ichhra Bazaar almost succeeded in their nefarious designs. And it was not a legal action against the perpetrators that prevented further escalation, but an apology from the already terrified victim. Unfortunately, our people are more accustomed to a mob mindset rather than self-reflection and critical thinking, dogma instead of freedom of belief. In a model world, the culprits would have been held legally accountable: here, a life had to be saved based on 'pragmatism' and 'compromise'.

The reason behind the crowd's anger was nothing novel or unprecedented; to them, this was a matter of religious impropriety. They have been nurtured to confront it – violently, if necessary – and many undoubtedly believed they had the right to act. In terms of religion or morality, this was an opportunity to earn sawaab (reward or virtue). This is not to name names, but those who have coupled their political agendas with rigid interpretations of religious scripture have also manifested various apocalyptic beliefs while promoting the hatred of whatever is unfamiliar. And, because violence has been allowed in the past and individuals involved have been able to get away with it, the possibility of it being repeated always remains.

Let's have no doubt that violent extremism is a phenomenon that has crossed cultures and religions throughout history. It is the expression of a desire to defend and control, for which strong beliefs are devoted to violence if necessary. This encourages such social groups to oppose any rights threatening their prevailing beliefs. They tend to be uncompromising and outrageous in their behavior. In our part of the world, many religious figures, politicians, and even liberal elites have used such groups to settle scores, stay in power and remain relevant.

Given that law enforcers are also part of the public, what are they supposed to do when those supposed to fix such depraved norms allow them to perpetuate? Tragically, in this day and age, we cannot expect them to respond any differently, even when top judges are threatened, especially when other powerful actors also start backing out, fearing the mob's wrath. By failing to enforce meaningful accountability, everyone will one day pay the price for selective policing.

Strangely, the majority of blasphemy charges are levelled against Muslims by Muslims, even though Islam advocates peace and stresses living peacefully, both within the Muslim community and with people of other faiths. Many religious seminaries and notable religious personalities have been targeted over their differing interpretations of the scriptures. Since the state isn't even willing to protect its police officers, let alone the community, everyone eventually surrenders to the goons.

In my early years of policing, I innocently mentioned how stressful it was dealing with law and order during Muslim festive occasions. At the same time, the celebrations of our minority faiths would pass by unnoticed. In response, a cleric aggressively questioned my faith. A senior officer had to quickly intervene and impugn my remarks over my "lack of familiarity with policing norms". He was concerned about the possible consequences.

Our society is experiencing the dangerous trend of vigilantism due to a complicated combination of ignorance, arrogance, and obscurantism. Policing has become very difficult and dangerous due to it. As a society and as rulers, we must understand this trend and implement calculated policy interventions, such as education reforms, social de-radicalization programs, improved policing, and judicial robustness at the earliest opportunity.

Stakeholders need to realize how quickly misinformation can escalate situations and the role of social leaders who can step into the fray and bring calm amid the chaos. Because of prevailing socio-economic issues, political instability and poor governance, ignorance, illiteracy and irrational convictions have started gaining hold in our populace. There is an urgent need to put an end to religious extremism through better tutelage of at-risk populations, opening more doors for the disadvantaged and recognizing how fear and ignorance play a role in promoting extremism. Teaching tolerance and respect for diversity has helped counter violent ideologies in progressive societies.

The recent incident has elicited various reactions. Many have condemned the violence and hailed Shehrbano's heroism. Some see this as an admonitory tale, warning society of the potential for miscommunication through the seemingly innocuous choices we make, which can trigger a life-or-death situation. The case, however, must also alarm our policymakers and get them to take immediate action to address growing vigilantism. The triggers of such incidents seem to be growing more and more abstract. Law enforcement agencies must re-prioritize and re-strategize how to deal with these situations before there is a wider breakout of mob justice.

SOURCE: ARAB NEWS, MARCH 1, 2024

Dilemma of TTP merger

DR. SYED KALEEM IMAM

As the political landscape in the capital undergoes its final transformation, there is trouble brewing in the country's northwest region as different terrorist groups start to merge. As this trend picks up, the new government's efforts to achieve political stability, economic recovery, and effective governance will be threatened. It has very little time to create and implement a cohesive plan to combat this threat.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and neighboring Balochistan and Punjab were plagued by terrorist violence throughout 2023. Approximately 1,500 terrorism-related deaths were reported in 2023, making it the bloodiest year in recent memory. Lately, two brave police officers, SP Ijaz Khan and Constable Qaiser, were martyred in action as they confronted the notorious terrorists Mohsin Qadir and Essa of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Mardan's Zada Mata area. As they take office, the new governments must ensure that this grim trend is not allowed to continue in the coming year.

But distressing reports indicate that the volatile landscape of Pakistani militant groups is undergoing a seismic shift. Rumors are rife about Hafiz Gul Bahadur's faction merging with the TTP leadership led by Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, already aligned with Tehreek-e-Lashkar-e-Islam. The latest significant development within the TTP hierarchy is Hafiz Gul Bahadur potentially assuming the second-in-command role.

Notorious for its ability to attract and mobilize young recruits, the TTP stands to bolster its ranks further with this merger. Masuds, renowned for their adept organization of extortion networks but lacking in conscription capabilities, are expected to benefit substantially from this alliance. Speculation arises whether these maneuvers are reminiscent of pre-2014 power dynamics within the regions.

Wazir-dominated HGB and Masud-dominated TTP otherwise traditional rivals, dwelling in North and South Waziristan in the order, with this historically strong alliance may well heat up simmering tensions. With the TTP poised to exert even greater influence, a troubling era fraught with new and formidable security dilemmas looms.

The prospect of coordinated attacks in the region has been raised. There is a possibility that both North and South Waziristan will experience serious security problems, including the influx of militants, which will have spillover effects for neighboring areas like Bannu, Swat, DI Khan, and Peshawar. Adding to these concerns is the apprehension that the new government may take a "soft" approach to these threats.

It is noteworthy though that the HGB, TTP, JUI, and LI have similar characteristics. They are mercenary outfits that provide services such as extortion and killing to the highest bidders. Nevertheless, the TTP is also ambitious: it aims to unite different religious militant factions opposing the government in order to achieve its strategic objectives. Many have argued that its progress in this area is a result of the state's weakening authority, which is concerning.

Initially, it has prioritized attacks on police over attacks on assets critical to national security. As the state's capacity to enforce the law is gradually eroded, this puts the country at risk of an eventual showdown between the extremists and the military.

It is unfortunate that a number of incidents have been underreported as a result of a media blackout on reporting terrorist activity. Although this approach may provide some temporary relief, it will ultimately hinder a cohesive national response. Every person must contribute to a war effort, which is essentially what we are facing right now. It is important to see the entire community taking action.

Despite efforts to engage in ceasefire talks and peace negotiations, distrust between the Pakistan and the TTP persists. Low-scale skirmishes continue, triggered by leadership changes and the emergence of other like-minded groups. And, while attempts have been made to manage the TTP, the bigger challenge of addressing the root causes of extremism and violence in the region remains largely unaddressed.

As discussions continue, policymakers must remain on top of the evolving landscape and address the underlying grievances that drive militant activities. A majority of people engage in violent behavior because of unemployment, their attraction to easy means of enrichment, or because they think it confers an aura of machismo upon them. The potential of more mergers between TTP factions amidst other ongoing security challenges underscores the complex dynamics of extremism in Pakistan.

Primarily the challenge for the federal government is two-tiered: to secure Pakistan and ensure no part of the country is available for terrorist outfits to establish themselves and to prevent militants from creating sanctuaries in Afghanistan. The new government, together with the security establishment and provincial set-ups, must hammer out a failsafe plan to secure the country, particularly those parts of KP and Balochistan that have been suffering from frequent terrorist attacks.

The basic response structure exists in the form of the National Action Plan. Though the key is to update it as per the requirements of the day and implement it. Furthermore, dealing with militancy should be made a one-window operation, preferably led by local police and administrations and inputs from NACTA and support from all stakeholders.

With regard to improving capacity, it is important to understand that the integration of Khasadars into the police force NMD has proven counterproductive as they lack qualifications and proper training. Instead, youth from tribal areas who meet police recruitment standards should be inducted into the force. It is also widely believed that the heavy presence of armed forces in the newly merged districts (NMDs) hinders independent policing.

Incentives for DPOs in NMDs, like the one recently given to Balochistan, would motivate them to work there. Makeshift arrangements must be replaced with permanent police facilities so that effective law enforcement can be ensured. The security forces should meanwhile dedicate all their energies to eliminating the terrorist threat and protecting the lives of civil and military personnel on the frontlines.

Engagement should continue with those who lay down arms, and diplomacy with the Afghans should continue over the removal of any local sanctuaries. There is also a pressing need for better border management, ending systematic corruption, restoring local confidence, and prohibiting the cultivation of 'assets'. Unless the new dispensation in Islamabad tackles terrorism head-on, economic stability and social cohesion will remain elusive.

SOURCE: EN.WENEWS.PK, MARCH 4, 2024

2 terrorists killed in separate operations in Khyber, Dera Ismail Khan districts

Two terrorists were killed in separate operations last night in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the military's media affairs wing said.

A press release from the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that an IBO (intelligence-based operation) was conducted in Khyber district, during which terrorist ring leader Shmrooz Sheenay was "sent to hell" by the security forces.

"In another operation conducted by the security forces in Dera Ismail Khan district, terrorist Mansoor was also successfully neutralised," ISPR said.

It said that weapons, ammunition and explosives were also recovered from the slain terrorists, who remained "actively involved in numerous terrorist activities against security forces".

It said that the terrorists were also involved in extortion and target killings of innocent civilians and were highly wanted by the law enforcement agencies.

It added that a sanitisation operation was underway to eliminate any other terrorists found in the area.

"Locals of the area appreciated the operations and expressed their full support to eliminate the menace of terrorism," it said.

Two soldiers were martyred in an exchange of fire with terrorists in KP's Lakki Marwat district on Wednesday. Two militants were also killed in the engagement.

Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terror activities in the past year, especially in KP and Balochistan after the banned militant Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan ended its ceasefire with the government in November 2022.

According to an annual security report issued by the Centre for Research and Security Studies, Pakistan witnessed 1,524 violence-related fatalities and 1,463 injuries from 789 terror attacks and counter-terror operations in 2023 – marking a record six-year high.

KP and Balochistan were the primary centres of violence, accounting for over 90 per cent of all fatalities and 84pc of attacks, including incidents of terrorism and security forces operations.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 7, 2024

TTP threat

DURING a discussion in the Security Council on Wednesday, Pakistani Ambassador to the UN Munir Akram rightly observed that, left unchecked, the banned TTP could become “a global terrorist threat”. Considering the TTP’s links with Al Qaeda, and its blood-soaked campaign inside Pakistan, the world should be concerned about the group’s activities. Mr Akram added that it needed to be probed how the TTP could secure high-grade weapons, and from where it acquired its funds. He also asked the UNSC to endorse Pakistan’s demand that the Afghan Taliban cut their ties with the TTP. This demand is not new; Islamabad has publicly and privately, in subtle as well as stronger language, called upon Kabul to rein in the TTP. Pakistan’s calls have been met with a mixed response: there has been little action by the Afghan Taliban, though they have claimed they will not let their soil be used by anti-Pakistan militants. There are reports they have imprisoned some TTP fighters and shifted them away from the Pakistan border. But the attacks have not stopped.

What is needed from Kabul are solid steps, not half measures. Clamping down on the TTP, and then allowing them to wreak havoc in Pakistan will not work. At the UNSC meeting, Roza Otunbayeva, the secretary general’s special representative on Afghanistan, appeared to endorse Pakistan’s position, observing that “there are well-founded concerns over the presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan”, while mentioning the TTP by name. Pakistan’s new government should implement a dual-track policy to neutralise the TTP threat. Firstly, it must keep channels with the Afghan Taliban open and continue to communicate its concerns about terrorist activity originating in Afghanistan. Secondly, Pakistan should cooperate with other states at the UN as well as regional blocs, such as the SCO, to make it clear to Kabul that hosting militants will end any chance of wider acceptance of the Afghan Taliban regime by the international community.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 8, 2024

4 terrorists killed in intelligence-based operation in North Waziristan

Security forces killed four terrorists in an intelligence-based operation (IBO) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's North Waziristan district, the military's media affairs wing said.

According to a press release from the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the IBO was conducted on the reported presence of terrorists in the area.

"During the conduct of the operation, intense fire exchange took place between own troops and the terrorists, as a result of which four terrorists were sent to hell," it said.

Weapons, ammunition and explosives were also recovered from the slain terrorists, who remained actively involved in numerous terrorist activities in the area, the ISPR said.

It added that a sanitisation operation was being conducted to eliminate any other terrorists found in the area.

"Locals of the area appreciated the operation and expressed their full support to eliminate the menace of terrorism," the ISPR statement concluded.

A day earlier, two terrorists were killed in separate operations in KP's Khyber and Dera Ismail Khan districts.

On Wednesday, two soldiers were martyred in an exchange of fire with terrorists in Lakki Marwat. Two militants were also killed in the engagement.

Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terror activities in the past year, especially in KP and Balochistan after the banned militant Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan ended its ceasefire with the government in November 2022.

According to a security report issued by the Centre for Research and Security Studies last month, Pakistan experienced 97 militant attacks in February, resulting in 87 fatalities and 118 injuries.

The report highlighted a significant escalation in violence in Balochistan, juxtaposed with a decline in tribal districts and mainland KP.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 8, 2024

10 terrorists killed in separate operations in KP's North Waziristan

Ten terrorists were killed by security forces in separate operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's North Waziristan district, according to the military's media wing.

The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), in a press release issued today, said that four terrorists were "sent to hell" during an intelligence-based operation (IBO).

Consequently, during the follow-up sanitisation operation, four more terrorists were "successfully neutralized" by the security forces, it said.

In a separate operation in the district, the agency said it identified five terrorists who were trying to infiltrate the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

"After an intense fire exchange, two terrorists – Hazrat Umer and Rehman Niaz – were also sent to hell, while three other terrorists got injured," it added.

The press release said that Pakistan has consistently asked the interim Afghan government to ensure effective border management on their side of the border.

"Interim Afghan government is expected to fulfil its obligations and deny the use of Afghan soil by terrorists for perpetuating acts of terrorism against Pakistan," it said.

"Security forces of Pakistan are determined and remain committed to secure its borders and wipe out the menace of terrorism from the country," it added.

On Wednesday, security forces killed two terrorists in separate operations in the KP district.

Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terror activities in the past year, especially in KP and Balochistan after the banned militant Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan ended its ceasefire with the government in November 2022.

According to an annual security report issued by the Centre for Research and Security Studies, Pakistan witnessed 1,524 violence-related fatalities and 1,463 injuries from 789 terror attacks and counter-terror operations in 2023 – marking a record six-year high.

KP and Balochistan were the primary centres of violence, accounting for over 90 per cent of all fatalities and 84pc of attacks, including incidents of terrorism and security forces operations.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 9, 2024

UK govt unveils controversial new definition of extremism

LONDON: As prominent figures in the Conservative party, including PM Rishi Sunak, create a narrative about London's largely peaceful pro-Palestine protests as "a threat to democracy" or "extremist", the British government on Thursday unveiled a new definition of extremism and banned ministers and civil servants from talking to or funding organisations deemed to fall within the new meaning.

Whereas the previous definition of extremism focused on actions, the new one frames it around an ideology. It says extremism "is the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to: negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; or undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in (1) or (2)".

The justification given for the new definition by Communities Minister Michael Gove is that they are a response to hate crimes against Jews and Muslims since the Oct 7 Gaza conflict. But critics warn that it risks infringing on freedom of speech, and that it will largely target Muslim groups.

In the aftermath of Sunak's warning some weeks earlier that "Islamists and far right groups" are threatening British democracy, Gove said the aim of this new definition was to target "extreme rightwing and Islamist extremists who are seeking to separate Muslims from the rest of society and create division within Muslim communities".

In his announcement in the House of Commons, Gove said groups included the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) and CAGE International. Other organisations whose names have been leaked as potentially falling within the definition are Friends of al-Aqsa, 5Pillars and Palestine Action.

MAB and CAGE have both condemned the definition change, saying it was an assault on civil liberties which targeted Muslim groups.

It comes as Gove singled out pro-Palestinian protesters who have been marching for a ceasefire in Gaza, and criticised those who use the slogan "from the river to the sea", the meaning of which is itself contested.

Tell Mama, a group which monitors anti-Muslim incidents, said last month that anti-Muslim hate crimes also had grown by 335 per cent since the Oct 7 attacks. Antisemitic incidents rose by 147pc in 2023 to record levels, especially after the attacks, according to Community Security Trust, a Jewish safety watchdog.

Still, concern has been voiced by figures ranging from the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, the spiritual head of the Anglican Communion, to former Conservative government ministers.

Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, who has been battling racist and Islamophobic comments from Tory ministers in recent weeks, said the new definition will create problems. "Without achieving a broad consensus on the definition of extremism, the government risks exacerbating community tensions further and making the job of tackling extremism more difficult."

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 15, 2024

DSP, tribal elder killed in Sibi, Bajaur attacks

QUETTA / BAJAUR: A senior police officer and a tribal elder were killed in two attacks in Sibi and Bajaur, according to officials.

Sibi Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Khalid Zaman Marri was passing through the bazaar area in Sibi town when unknown assailants opened fire at his vehicle near the Chanak roundabout area.

The police officer got critically injured after receiving six bullets and was taken to the Combined Military Hospital. He later succumbed to his injuries.

One of the attackers was injured after the DSP's security guard returned fire. He, along with other attackers, managed to flee but was caught by the police near Nishtar Road and shifted to the hospital.

Police officials said the motive behind the attack couldn't be ascertained immediately, and no group has claimed responsibility.

"We are investigating the attack from all aspects," Sibi SSP Inayatullah Bangulzai said.

A senior police officer said DSP Marri had served as SP Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) in Sibi.

The victim was the elder brother of Mir Asghar Marri, who was the former district mayor of Sibi.

Tribal elder killed in Bajaur

In Bajaur, a tribal elder was killed in a remote-controlled bomb explosion in the mountainous area of Barang tehsil.

According to locals and police, the attack occurred in the Asil Targao locality at about 9:25am. The target was a tribal elder, Malik Lal Zareef.

The explosive device planted along the road went off when Mr Zareef, who was on foot, reached the spot.

They said that the 55-year-old victim was critically wounded and died before he could be moved to a hospital.

Police have confirmed the explosion and said an investigation has been launched to arrest the culprits. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attack.

A senior police official told Dawn that a team from the Barang police station has launched a search operation, but no arrests have been made so far.

The official added that police personnel have collected evidence from the crime scene.

'Militants' killed in Lakki

Separately, three alleged militants were killed in an intelligence-based operation in Lakki Marwat, officials said on Friday.

A district police official said that the CTD and security forces conducted a joint operation in a rural area of Lakki Marwat on the information about militants' presence.

"An intense fire exchange took place between security personnel and the militants," the official said, adding that three alleged militants were gunned down.

They have been identified as Zubair, a local militant commander; Faisal; and Jawad.

They belonged to the Abdulkhel and Nawerkhel areas and were allegedly affiliated with the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan.

According to the officials, the militants were involved in attacks on police and security forces, target killings and extortion. Ammunition and explosives were also recovered from their possession.

Following the gunfight, reinforcements arrived in the area, and a search was launched to capture the fleeing militants.

The militants' presence in several rural localities, including the mountainous areas of Abdulkhel and Shah Hasankhel, is considered a constant threat to peace in the southern district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 16, 2024

Defining extremism

THE British government's recent decision to redefine extremism has stirred up debate about the motives behind the move, and the greater ramifications it may have for those who disagree with state policy. There are genuine fears that the British decision could prompt other Western states – pandering to populist constituencies – to take similar steps.

Much like the global debate regarding the elusive definition of terrorism, overly broad interpretations of extremism could be used to haul up those critical of the state in the name of making the world safe from extremists. There is reason to be wary as leading members of the UK's ruling Conservative Party, including the prime minister, have termed pro-Palestine marches in the country 'extremist'. Some Muslim groups have already been named by British officials as falling under this new definition, and others may be next.

Redefining extremism may well be the first step to clamping down on advocacy for Palestine. Ironically, many Western governments are rattled by the pro-Palestine 'from the river to the sea' chant, deeming it extremist, yet fail to see the monstrous, genocidal extremism of the Israeli state.

While states need to act against radicalised actors that preach violence against non-combatants, it must be ensured that national liberation movements, such as the Palestinian struggle, are not tarred as 'extremist', and that governments don't use broad powers to lock up those who criticise the official line. This grand crusade against 'extremism' could meet the same fate as the 'global war on terror', an endless campaign which, while claiming to fight terrorism, ended up destroying countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq. The new anti-extremism campaign could disproportionately target Muslims and others in Western societies simply for speaking up for Palestine, or criticising the war-mongering of Western governments. It could also influence right-wing actors, such as India's BJP, to tighten the screws on their own Muslim populations in the name of fighting 'extremism'.

Instead of coming up with narrow definitions, the international community should deliberate on what exactly qualifies as hate speech and extremism. Certainly, violence and threats of violence and intimidation against religious groups, sects, or ethno-linguistic communities are unacceptable, and most states already have laws to address these threats. Moreover, antiterrorism legislation has to be accompanied by sufficient legal safeguards so that individuals accused of committing or promoting violence can defend themselves. Bypassing fundamental rights in the name of defending them is inexcusable. Arguably, 'extremism' is an even more subjective term than 'terrorism', which is why it is essential that there is maximum global consensus on what constitutes extremism. If the aim is to stop the demonisation of certain communities, then global consensus should be easy to reach. Otherwise, moves to redefine extremism will remain suspect.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 18, 2024

2 soldiers martyred, 8 terrorists killed in attack on Gwadar Port Authority complex



Smoke wafts up from an attack on the Gwadar Port Authority Complex in Gwadar, Balochistan.

Two soldiers were martyred while eight terrorists were killed by the Pakistan Army after it thwarted an attack on the Gwadar Port Authority Colony, according to the military's media wing.

A press release from the Inter Services Public Relations said that a group of eight terrorists attempted to enter the Port Authority Colony but were successfully thwarted by security forces personnel.

"Own troops employed for security responded immediately and effectively engaged the terrorists, and in ensuing fire exchange, all eight terrorists were sent to hell.

"A large quantity of arms, ammunition and explosives was also recovered," the ISPR added.

It said that Sepoy Bahar Khan, 35, a resident of Dera Ghazi Khan district, and Sepoy Imran Ali, 28, a resident of Khairpur district, “fought gallantly, sacrificed their lives” and were martyred in the exchange of fire.

“Security forces of Pakistan, in step with the nation, remain determined to thwart attempts of sabotaging peace and stability of Balochistan, and such sacrifices of our brave soldiers further strengthen our resolve,” the ISPR said.

Makran Commissioner Saeed Ahmed Umrani told Dawn.com that multiple blasts were also reported in the attack. A large contingent of police and security forces had reached the scene when the intense firing was ongoing, he added.

Gwadar Senior Superintendent of Police Captain (retd) Zohaib Mohsin initially told Dawn.com that eight armed assailants were gunned down but later revised the count to seven. Regarding the status of the assault, he said that the firing had “completely stopped”.

A statement from the United Nations Department for Safety and Security said “several explosions followed by continuous firing” were reported during the attack on the complex, adding that the facility hosts several government and paramilitary offices.

The statement added there were no immediate reports of casualties, elaborating that seven personnel from three UN agencies based in Gwadar and two UN agencies on missions were “safe and accounted for”.

The Majeed Brigade of the proscribed Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for the attack.

Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terror activities in the past year, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan after the banned militant Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan ended its ceasefire with the government in November 2022.

In November, 14 Pakistan Army soldiers were martyred after militants attacked two vehicles of security forces in Gwadar. The military vehicles came under attack while moving from Pasni to Ormara in the coastal district.

According to a security report issued by the Centre for Research and Security Studies last month, Pakistan experienced 97 militant attacks in February, resulting in 87 fatalities and 118 injuries.

The report highlighted a significant escalation in violence in Balochistan, juxtaposed with a decline in tribal districts and mainland KP.

‘Message loud and clear’

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif appreciated security forces for thwarting the attack.

The prime minister commended the valour and professional skills of the personnel and officers of the police and security forces.

He also paid tribute to the martyred personnel who laid down their lives during the operation, the PM Office Media Wing said in a press release.

PM Shehbaz further observed that those trying to target peace in Gwadar and Balochistan wanted to interrupt the process for the country's economic prosperity.

The prime minister vowed to foil all internal and external conspiracies with the help of the people.

Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti hailed security and law enforcement officials for their response against the attackers, saying that "the message is loud and clear."

He added that "whosoever chooses to use violence will see no mercy from the state."

Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz, according to a press release, also condemned the terrorist attack and congratulated security forces for repelling it.

What is the BLA's Majeed Brigade?

BLA's Majeed Brigade, which was formed in 2011, is a particularly lethal guerilla cell of the BLA. It was named after a guard of former prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was killed while attempting to assassinate the PPP founder. Its presence in Afghanistan is also well documented and even reported by Indian media.

Some allege that the group also maintains sanctuaries in areas along the Pak-Iran border.

The so-called brigade, which is the suicide squad of the BLA, mostly targets security forces and Chinese interests in Pakistan. It also claimed responsibility for the April 2022 suicide attack outside the Karachi University's Confucius Institute.

It also carried out a number of attacks in 2022, including those targeting military camps in Balochistan's Naushki and Panjgur districts, where the militants kept security forces engaged for three days. Twenty terrorists were killed during clearance operations after the Naushki and Panjgur attacks, the military's media affairs wing had said in a statement, adding that nine security personnel had embraced martyrdom.

The outfit had also claimed responsibility for three coordinated attacks launched using rockets and sophisticated weapons in Balochistan's Mach town in January, some 70 kilometres from the provincial capital of Quetta. Four security personnel and two civilians embraced martyrdom in the clearance operation.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 20, 2024

Nacta to be restructured on modern lines

ISLAMABAD: Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi said that the National Counter Terrorism Authority (Nacta) will be restructured on modern lines.

Chairing an important meeting at Nacta headquarters, Mr Naqvi said that the authority will be on the front foot in the war against terrorism and it will be restructured to achieve this objective.

The national coordinator of Nacta, Rai Tahir, briefed the minister on the authority's functioning during the meeting.

The minister stressed the need for complete implementation on the National Action Plan (NAP) at all costs and convened a meeting of the coordination committee next week.

A 20-point National Action Plan for countering terrorism and extremism had been chalked out by Nacta in consultation with stakeholders and approved on Dec 24, 2014, by the parliament.

The decision came following a deadly terrorist attack on the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar.

The interior minister took the decision to implement NAP in the wake of recent terrorist attacks in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including an attack on a security checkpoint in the Mir Ali area of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's North Waziristan district, resulting in the martyrdom of seven soldiers of Pakistan Army.

"The federal government will implement the National Action Plan (NAP) at any cost to counter terrorism," Mr Naqvi was quoted as saying this in the meeting.

It was decided to summon a meeting of the coordination committee of NAP next week to examine progress on implementation of the plan, which would be chaired by the interior minister himself.

"It is more important for us to take preemptive measures to eliminate terrorists and their facilitators instead of taking action after every incident of terrorism," the interior minister said.

He summoned a detailed report on the capacity of all provincial counterterrorism departments (CTDs).

The minister said that practical steps were needed to be taken against terrorism. A comprehensive strategy would be formulated to uproot terrorism and extremism, he added.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 21, 2024

Terrorist killed in intelligence-based operation in Panjgur

The military's media affairs wing said that a terrorist was killed during an intelligence-based operation (IBO) in Balochistan's Panjgur district.

According to a statement issued by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), security forces conducted the operation.

"During the conduct of operation, own troops effectively engaged the terrorists' location and resultantly terrorist Chakar Liaquat was sent to hell while two terrorists got injured," the ISPR said.

It added that a weapon and ammunition were also recovered from the killed militant, who "remained actively involved in numerous terrorist activities".

"Sanitisation operation is being carried out to eliminate any other terrorist found in the area as the security forces of Pakistan are determined to wipe out the menace of terrorism from the country," the statement said.

Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terror activities in the past year, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan after the banned militant Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan ended its ceasefire with the government in November 2022.

On Wednesday, two soldiers were martyred while eight terrorists were killed by the Pakistan Army after it thwarted an attack on the Gwadar Port Authority Colony.

According to an annual security report issued by the Centre for Research and Security Studies, Pakistan witnessed 1,524 violence-related fatalities and 1,463 injuries from 789 terror attacks and counter-terror operations in 2023 – marking a record six-year high.

KP and Balochistan were the primary centres of violence, accounting for over 90 per cent of all fatalities and 84pc of attacks, including incidents of terrorism and security forces operations.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 21, 2024

Jabhat Ansar al-Mahdi Khorasan Emerges as Prominent Faction of Hafiz Gul Bahadur in Pakistan

BY: RICCARDO VALLE

Executive Summary

The militant landscape of Pakistan is becoming more complex due to the emergence of several new, small, and highly capable militant groups. They are largely connected to two umbrella organizations, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Hafiz Gul Bahadur (HGB).

While HGB includes many subgroups, Jabhat Ansar al-Mahdi Khorasan (JAMK) quickly rose to prominence thanks to its dedication to forming a proper media entity tasked with methodically claiming attacks. JAMK releases videos and statements from the group's leadership, in contrast with the reclusive leaders of HGB.

The militant landscape of Pakistan is becoming more complex due to the emergence of several new, small, and highly capable militant groups. These groups ostensibly act as independent entities and claim to admire the Afghan Taliban's model of a jihadist group that effectively transitioned from insurgency to a de facto government. However, they maintain that their fight is solely confined to Pakistan, where they seek to enforce sharia.

These groups include Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), Ansarul Jihad (AuJ), Majlis-e-Askari, Jaish-e-Fursan-e-Muhammad, Jabhat al-Junud al-Mahdi (headed by Amir Sufiyan), and Jabhat Ansar al-Mahdi Khorasan (JAMK). Their links with their parent organizations – the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Hafiz Gul Bahadur (HGB, named after its founder and current leader) – have been disclosed by the militants themselves, their own modalities, and their patterns of attack (The Khorasan Diary, July 13, 2023). They are, therefore, anything but independent.

Jabhat Ansar al-Mahdi Khorasan's Activities and Importance

JAMK first emerged quietly in late 2022, but in 2023 the group started to consistently claim attacks targeting Pakistan's security forces, especially in the Bannu District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (X/@SaleemMehsud, February 14, 2023). The group is part of the broader HGB organization and constitutes one of its main factions. It is vital to situate the emergence of JAMK – as well as all newly formed militant groups – in the environment that arose after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. After the Taliban seized power, Jihadist militant groups carefully balanced their objective of creating an ideologically driven "Islamic" proto-state with the policies of the Taliban's Afghan Interim Government (AIG), which both

sheltered the groups and restrained them (Dawn, July 10, 2023). In Afghanistan, militants can gain access to modern weapons, but acquiring them is difficult and is monitored by the Afghan Taliban (The Khorasan Diary, January 4).

Conversely, JAMK was born in a progressively expanding area of cooperation between different militant groups, such as the TTP and HGB. This trend has been endorsed by external militant entities, such as al-Qaeda and its local branch, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) (The Khorasan Diary, June 4, 2023). Since late 2023, this cooperation has expanded to include coordinated attacks by the TTP and Tehreek-e-Lashkar-e-Islam Pakistan (TLIP) (X/@abdsayedd, December 14, 2023). The group has conducted most of its attacks in the Bannu District, particularly the areas of Jani Khel and Baka Khel (X/@SaleemMehsud, June 16, 2023). The group has also disclosed that it carried out attacks in Lakki Marwat District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, in May 2023. This confirms it has the capability to launch attacks in multiple neighboring districts (The Khorasan Diary, February 14).

While HGB includes many subgroups, JAMK quickly rose to prominence thanks to its dedication to forming a proper media entity tasked with methodically claiming attacks. JAMK also releases videos and statements from the group's leadership. This starkly contrasts with HGB, which has remained media-shy and avoided public attention.

JAMK's Leadership

JAMK is headed by Commander Sadiqullah, who is from the Wazir tribe of the Baka Khel Area of Bannu District. There is no deputy emir of the group. However, every year, the group selects new individuals for several departments of the group, which is similar to the TTP. Among other vital figures, Maulvi Umar Mansoor Haqqani is in charge of the group's military operations (The Khorasan Diary, February 15). According to JAMK spokesman Zubair Waziristani, the group includes five sections: the al-Nusra Department, the Institute of Research and Publication, the Department of War, the Department of Intelligence, and the Central Shura. [1]

The media arm of the group is called al-Mansoor Media. On November 21, 2023, Zubair Waziristani officially inaugurated the media arm by releasing the official logo and sharing more videos and claims of attacks by JAMK. Previously, videos from the group featured mid-level commanders, such as Mawlana Abid Waziristani. However, after November 21, the group published a video series that imitated those produced by the TTP, such as one series dedicated to the al-Badr Battalion suicide squad (The Khorasan Diary, November 22, 2023).

The first JAMK-claimed suicide attack followed this uptick in media activities. On November 26, 2023, the group declared that one of its militants bombed a Pakistan Army convoy in the Baka Khel Area of Bannu District, killing two nearby civilians and wounding ten other people (Dawn, November 27, 2023). Since the start of the new year, JAMK has claimed eight other attacks, primarily against surveillance cameras and security forces on patrol in the Jani Khel and Baka Khel areas of Bannu District (Dawn, February 8).

Conclusion

The potential threat posed by JAMK rests in its ability to carry out unpredictable suicide attacks against security forces in an area where both the TTP and HGB operate. Moreover, shortly after the November 26, 2023 attack, Pakistan formally asked the AIG to hand over Hafiz Gul Bahadur himself, who is allegedly residing in the southern Afghan provinces of Paktika and Khost (The Friday Times, December 13, 2023). Pakistan also noted that the suicide attacker was identified as an Afghan national, which is consistent with Pakistan's allegations that the TTP, TJP, and HGB are deploying Afghan nationals in suicide operations (The Express Tribune, November 30, 2023). JAMK and HGB pose a threat to Pakistan, but they also risk disturbing Pakistan's bilateral relations with Afghanistan and contributing to the destabilization of the South Asian region.

SOURCE: JAMESTOWN.ORG, MARCH 22, 2024

Human traffickers in Pakistan sharpen their cruelty

- 10 Pakistani citizens tortured, kidnapped by smugglers who lured them with promise of a better life in Europe
- One released after payment of Rs10 million
- Iranian police rescue two victims
- Agent taken into custody

LAHORE: Adding another layer of cruelty to the already vicious business of human trafficking, notorious human smugglers have started taking advantage of Pakistani immigrants trying to illegally reach Europe via Iran by holding them for ransom.

The smugglers in Pakistan with the help of their sub-agents detain and torture immigrants aspiring to reach Europe, film the ordeal, and send it back to their respective families to seek money for the safe release of their loved ones.

Over the past month, three such incidents were reported in which as many as 10 young men were tortured and incarcerated by these gangs. A few of them paid money to secure freedom while some were got released by the Iran police in collaboration with the Pakistani embassy in Tehran.

The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) said that the dangerous trend of arranging the travel of illegal immigrants and detaining them abroad to extract heavy amounts – by local gangs in cohort with their international counterparts – has picked steam in recent times.

Last month, Muhammad Husnain, a resident of Hafizabad, along with his cousin Faisal and neighbour Anwar left for Iran via road to reach Europe. They travelled along with (travel) agent Muhammad Sarwar on valid visas who promised to take them to Greece via Turkey from Iran.

Upon arriving in Tehran, Sarwar sought \$2,500 each from the trio to send them to Europe. The three contacted their families in Pakistan for the money. As the families failed to raise the required amount, Sarwar took them to a three-storey house in Tehran on the pretext that he would arrange their travel against a few hundred bucks.

“When we reached the house, the people present there overpowered us and shut us in a small room. After 24 hours, some three to four persons wearing facemasks gave us water and afterwards, they unleashed brutal torture on us. They also filmed the torture and sent it to our families in Pakistan demanding \$5,000 each for freeing us,” Husnain told Dawn.

In the captivity, they treated the captives like animals. “When our families told the captors that they could not arrange the money they became crueller. They cut an ear of Faisal, burnt the hand of Anwar, and put nails into my feet. They would use electric shocks to torture us and send the videos to our families which finally paid a sum of Rs300,000 using ‘Easypaisa’ to a pointed person,” he said and added their captors subsequently put them in separate rooms.

Meanwhile, Husnain’s family approached the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation which contacted the Pakistan embassy in Tehran. The Pakistani mission took up the matter with the Iranian police and also flagged the FIA in Gujrat for backtrack investigation.

Before the Iran police could raid the whereabouts of the culprits on the information provided by Pakistan Ambassador Muhammad Mudassar Tipu, Husnain managed to escape from the custody of his captors and a Pakistani taxi driver helped him contact his family back home.

“After 22 days of captivity, I got a chance to escape. My captors were confident that there were nails in my feet and I could not walk. One day they didn’t bother to lock me from the outside and I managed to escape. On road, I came across a Pakistani driver who helped me connect with my family who requested him to drop me at the Pakistani embassy,” Husnain said.

Meanwhile, the Iran police recovered Faisal and Anwar and handed them to the Pakistan embassy. The embassy shifted them to a hospital for treatment.

“We have learned that gangs of Pakistani human smugglers, in collaboration with some Afghans and Iranians, have indulged in this heinous crime. They lure potential illegal immigrants to Iran and detain them to seek a hefty amount from their families,” FIA Liaison Officer in Tehran Aftab Ahmad Butt told Dawn by phone.

‘Rs10m for ransom’

According to him, the Pakistan embassy also pursued two more cases in which seven young men from Sargodha and Islamabad areas were rescued from their captors. In one such case, the captors forced the family of a captive to pay Rs10m ransom for his release.

“Ambassador Mudassar Tipu has taken a keen interest in rescuing the Pakistanis and remained in constant touch with the Iranian authorities in this regard,” he said. There was a need to create awareness about the modus operandi of human smugglers operating in Pakistan, he added.

The Pakistan embassy had also informed the FIA about such cases in Iran, urging them to take strict action against the chain of these human smugglers in Pakistan.

“There is also a dire need for implementation of the policy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs regarding pilgrims going to Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia,” Ambassador Tipu said, adding that with the implementation of this policy, human smuggling could be curtailed.

“The governments of Pakistan and Iran are discussing signing an agreement for the security of pilgrims. We hope it is signed soon as it will be an important step forward in managing flow of people between the two countries,” the ambassador said.

'Agent arrested'

Meanwhile, the FIA in Punjab arrested Muhammad Sarwar after he returned to Pakistan after "selling" the three men to the gang. According to Husnain's brother, Muhammad Moazzam, all three victims are struggling to recover from this trauma.

"The three were jobless here and the families thought that they would earn handsomely once they reach Europe. But for all of us it turned out to be a nightmare. We are thankful to God that my brother and two others have returned safely," he said.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 24, 2024

FC soldier martyred, 4 terrorists killed as security forces thwart attack on naval base in Turbat

A Balochistan Frontier Corps soldier was martyred while four terrorists were killed as security forces thwarted an attack on a naval base in Turbat, the military's media affairs wing said.

In a statement, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that terrorists attempted to attack PNS Siddique in Turbat. It said that the attempt was foiled due to the "swift and effective response by the troops ensuring the safety and security of personnel and assets".

"Security forces in the vicinity were immediately mobilised to support the naval troops. Synergetic and effective response by the armed forces enabled killing of all four terrorists in ensuing joint clearance operation," it said.

The ISPR said that during the intense fire exchange 24-year-old Sepoy Noman Fareed of the Balochistan Frontier Corps embraced martyrdom.

Makran Commissioner Saeed Ahmed Umrani had earlier told Dawn that heavy exchange of fire and explosions were reported from the vicinity of Turbat airport on Monday night.

"The armed men attacked from three sides of the airport boundary, but security forces responded immediately and foiled their attempt to infiltrate the premises," he said over the phone from Turbat.

It should be mentioned that PNS Siddique is among the biggest naval air stations in the country.

Locals said that over a dozen blasts were heard in Turbat town, while the firing, which began around 10pm, continued late into the night.

The banned Balochistan Liberation Army claimed that its Majeed Brigade was behind the attack.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif commended security forces for foiling the terrorist attack. According to state broadcaster Radio Pakistan, the premier acknowledged that the militants were neutralised due to the timely and effective action of security forces, "preventing a potentially significant loss".

He also reaffirmed Pakistan's unwavering commitment to eradicating the menace of terrorism. PM Shehbaz emphasised that the entire nation firmly stood behind the country's courageous security forces.

Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terror activities in the past year, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan after the banned militant Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan ended its ceasefire with the government in November 2022.

The Turbat incident comes days after security forces foiled a militant attack on the Gwadar Port Authority Complex. According to the ISPR, a group of eight terrorists attempted to enter the complex but were successfully thwarted by security forces. Two soldiers were martyred while eight terrorists were killed.

In November, 14 Pakistan Army soldiers were martyred after militants attacked two vehicles of security forces in Gwadar. The military vehicles came under attack while moving from Pasni to Ormara in the coastal district.

According to a security report issued by the Centre for Research and Security Studies last month, Pakistan experienced 97 militant attacks in February, resulting in 87 fatalities and 118 injuries.

The report highlighted a significant escalation in violence in Balochistan, juxtaposed with a decline in tribal districts and mainland KP.

4 terrorists killed in DI Khan IBO

In a separate statement, the ISPR said four terrorists were killed as security forces conducted an intelligence-based operation (IBO) in Dera Ismail Khan on Monday.

“During the conduct of operation, after an intense fire exchange, four terrorists, including terrorist Mustafa, Terrorist Qismatullah and terrorist Islamuddin were sent to hell,” the ISPR said.

“The killed terrorists remained actively involved in numerous terrorist activities against security forces and killing of innocent civilians. Weapons, ammunition and explosives were also recovered from killed terrorists,” it said.

“Locals of the area appreciated the operation. Sanitisation operation is being carried out to eliminate any other terrorist found in the area as the security forces are determined to wipe out the menace of terrorism from the country,” the ISPR said.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 26, 2024

5 Chinese nationals killed in attack in KP's Bisham



This photo shows the site of an attack on a vehicle carrying Chinese nationals in Shangla

Five Chinese nationals and one Pakistani were killed in an attack on their convoy in Bisham tehsil of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Shangla, according to the regional police chief and a station house officer (SHO).

Reuters quoted Mohammad Ali Gandapur, the regional police chief, as saying that a suicide bomber rammed an explosives-laden vehicle into a convoy of Chinese engineers which was on its way from Islamabad to their camp in Dasu.

"Five Chinese nationals and their Pakistani driver were killed in the attack," Gandapur said.

The provincial police had reached the spot and started relief operations. The rest of the people in the convoy have been protected, Gandapur said.

Bisham SHO Bakht Zahir, while talking to Dawn.com, also confirmed that the incident claimed six lives, of which five were Chinese engineers and one was a Pakistani.

He said it was a “suicide blast” and the authorities concerned were collecting evidence. Security arrangements were tightened at the spot and the bodies were being shifted to a hospital, he further said.

“We will investigate from where and how the vehicle of a suicide bomber came and how it happened,” the SHO said.

Rescue 1122 station head Sheraz Khan said that the bodies were being shifted to the Bisham Tehsil Headquarters Hospital.

The rescue official said that after the blast, the vehicle with the Chinese passengers fell into a gorge and caught fire. A rescue team then reached the spot and put out the fire, he added.

Condemnations

President Asif Ali Zardari strongly condemned the attack and expressed “deep grief” over the deaths of the Chinese nationals.

In a statement issued by the Presidency, he conveyed his condolences to the families of the Chinese nationals and the neighbouring government.

“Anti-Pakistan elements will never succeed in damaging Pak-China friendship,” President Zardari asserted.

Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi also condemned the “suicide attack”, expressing “heartfelt condolences” to the bereaved families.

In a statement posted, he said, “We stand with the Chinese government and the families of the citizens killed in this hour of grief.

“Enemies have targeted the citizens of Pakistan’s extremely trusted friendly country. This was not an attack on Chinese citizens but also on Pakistan,” the minister added.

“The enemy will be given a strong response to this attack,” Naqvi vowed.

Privatisation Minister Abdul Aleem Khan said the attack was “incredibly upsetting and condemnable”.

In a post on X, he said, “The enemy is targeting Pak-China friendship and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under a well-thought conspiracy but the nation, along with the Pakistan Army, will thwart all evil plots.”

Former foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari condemned the attack and expressed his grief on the deaths of Chinese nationals.

In a statement posted on X, he said that the planners and the facilitators of the terror incident should be punished severely.

Extending his condolences to the Chinese government and praying for the speedy recovery of the injured, he said, “The miscreants of the Bisham incident cannot escape punishment.”

In July 2021, thirteen people, including nine Chinese nationals, were killed when a coach carrying them to an under-construction tunnel site of the 4,300-megawatt Dasu hydropower project fell into a ravine in the Upper Kohistan area after an explosion.

Although the Foreign Office had initially termed the incident an accident, the government later said traces of explosives had been found, with the information minister at the time saying “terrorism could not be ruled out”.

In November 2022, an anti-terrorism court in Hazara awarded the death sentence to two men after convicting them for planning the attack.

This is a developing story that is being updated as the situation evolves. Initial reports in the media can sometimes be inaccurate. We will strive to ensure timeliness and accuracy by relying on credible sources, such as concerned, qualified authorities and our staff reporters.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 26, 2024

Global terrorist threat

ZAHID HUSSAIN

THE deadly attack on a concert hall in Moscow last week, which left around 140 people dead, marks the expansion in the terrorist operations of the so-called Khorasan chapter of the militant Islamic State group. The daring IS-K assault in the Russian capital demonstrates the group's increasingly destructive capacity to carry out high-profile acts of terrorism beyond the region it has so far been operating in.

The attack has raised the profile of the IS-K as a global terrorist group that has long been active in Afghanistan and the surrounding countries. The suspects who were arrested are from the Central Asian region, which has produced a large contingent of foreign fighters for the Islamic State in the Middle East in the past. Many of them are now associated with its Khorasan chapter after the routing of the transnational jihadi group in Iraq and Syria.

It is, however, not clear why the group targeted Russia. According to some analysts, the militants see Russia as responsible for the persecution of Muslims. In September 2022, IS-K claimed responsibility for a deadly suicide bombing at the Russian embassy in Kabul. Moscow has long been concerned about the rise of IS-K's influence in the Central Asian states.

While accusing the Islamic extremists of the attack, the Russian president has also tried to link the incident to the war with Ukraine. A recent UN report quoted by the Western media said, "Some individuals of North Caucasus and Central Asian origin travelling from Afghanistan or Ukraine towards Europe represent an opportunity for [IS-K], which seeks to project violent attacks in the West."

Meanwhile, the Moscow massacre has alerted other countries to the growing terrorist threat. The IS-K has emerged as the most dangerous transnational terrorist group. A top American military official told a US congressional committee a day before the attack that the IS-K "retains the capability and the will to attack US and Western interests abroad, in as little as six months, with little to no warning". According to some media reports quoting Western counterterrorism officials, in recent months, several IS-K plots to attack targets in Europe have been foiled.

An offshoot of the Middle East-based IS, the militant outfit, which was formed in 2015, has been involved in a series of spectacular attacks in Afghanistan and Iran. It was behind a bombing attack earlier this year that killed over 80 people in the Iranian town of Kerman during a memorial procession for Maj-Gen Qasem Soleimani, an Iranian commander who was killed in an American drone strike in 2020 in Baghdad. Several other attacks in Iran also have the group's fingerprints all over them.

Just before the Moscow incident, the group had claimed responsibility for a suicide attack in Kandahar, the second largest city of Afghanistan, killing and injuring several people. The IS-K has also been responsible for attacks in Pakistan's Balochistan province. Some banned Sunni sectarian groups have reportedly joined the group.

The first signs of the transnational militant group organising itself in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region emerged in 2014. Early IS-K recruits came from the ranks of splinter factions of the Pakistani Taliban, who had been driven into Afghanistan after large-scale operations in the former tribal region by the Pakistan Army. Some low-ranking Afghan Taliban commanders also joined the radical group.

In 2014, Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost – a former Afghan Taliban commander from Kunar province – was named organiser for the group's Khorasan chapter. With some high-profile defections from the ranks of the Afghan Taliban, the group evolved a formal organisational structure.

In January 2015, the militants released a video proclaiming themselves the administrators of an official wilayat (province) for IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The creation of the shura for Khorasan (the historical name for the region including parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia) was endorsed by the IS supreme command. It named the former TTP commander of Orakzai Agency in Pakistan, Hafiz Saeed Khan, as IS head in the Khorasan region and Mullah Abdul Rauf, a former Afghan Taliban commander who had spent many years in Guantanamo, as his deputy.

Soon after the formation of its Khorasan chapter, the group became active in many provinces of Afghanistan. In most cases, defections from the Afghan Taliban ranks to the IS-K were motivated by the group's huge financial resources rather than its radical and rigid worldview and ideology. In many regions, the Afghan Taliban fought with the IS-K for control.

However, IS-K underwent a rapid surge in numbers – which reached, as per some estimates, 4,000 – after the US forces exited Afghanistan and the Taliban once more took up the reins. Most of them have apparently come from other transnational militant groups. Its alliance with the TTP has further strengthened it.

There was a marked escalation in IS-K attacks at the end of the American war. The terrorist group also attacked Kabul's international airport in 2021, in which 13 US troops and a large number of civilians were killed during the chaotic American withdrawal from the country.

According to a UN report released in January, the Afghan Taliban's efforts to defeat the group have caused the number of attacks in Afghanistan to decline. But the threat posed by this terror nexus goes beyond the region.

With their strength increasing, transnational militant groups and foreign fighters are a dangerous threat to not only Afghanistan but also its neighbours, especially Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban's continuing support for militant groups such as the TTP is seen as a significant reason behind the IS-K's resurgence.

Many IS-K fighters have come from TTP factions who took refuge in Afghanistan. While the IS-K has been fighting the Afghan Taliban, the group has coexisted with TTP factions in eastern Afghanistan.

The Moscow attack makes it clear that the group's growing capacity threatens the region and beyond. A joint regional strategy is needed to deal with this common threat.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 27, 2024

New terror wave

A STRING of deadly terrorist attacks over the past few days – with the bombing in KP’s Bisham area on Tuesday being the latest atrocity – drives home the grim point that Pakistan is in the midst of a multidimensional terrorist insurgency.

From the coast and interior of Balochistan to the rugged mountains of the north, violence is occurring with alarming frequency. While most of the victims thus far have been civil and military security personnel, the Bisham attack targeted Chinese nationals. According to officials, at least six people were killed in what has been termed a suicide bombing – five of them Chinese. The foreigners were en route to the Dasu power project from Islamabad when an explosives-laden car smashed into their vehicle.

Meanwhile in Turbat, Baloch separatist militants attacked the PNS Siddique naval base on Monday night. An FC trooper was martyred in the incident. Last week, security forces had thwarted a terrorist attack, also carried out by Baloch militants, on the Gwadar Port Authority Complex.

At the time of writing, no group had claimed responsibility for the Bisham bombing. In the past, both Baloch militants and religiously inspired fighters have targeted Chinese interests in the country. An ISPR statement has identified “certain foreign elements” as being responsible for the latest wave of terrorism, while the Foreign Office has said “enemies of Pakistan-China friendship” are behind the violence. Certainly, both the Bisham and Gwadar attacks appear to be aimed at derailing the Pakistan-China relationship, specifically the economic aspect of it. The fact that Chinese blood has been spilt makes matters more serious. Several past incidents have also resulted in the death of Chinese nationals, such as the 2021 attack in Kohistan, which is close to Bisham, and the 2022 assault on Karachi University’s Confucius Institute.

Beijing’s reaction has been firm, with the Chinese embassy demanding the Pakistani state take “practical and effective measures” to protect its nationals here. China has come to this country’s aid at difficult times, and invested in Pakistan when few others were willing to. Moreover, at a time when Pakistan is trying to woo foreign investors to bring their dollars here in order to breathe some life into a moribund economy, the country cannot afford terrorists attacking foreign workers.

Security must immediately be beefed up for all foreigners working in the country, particular Chinese nationals. The civilian and military leadership must work closely together to uproot the terrorist infrastructure without delay.

If malign foreign actors are involved in subterfuge, diplomatic channels need to be used to communicate to them that their facilitation of terrorist violence will be exposed before the international community. For the government, the honeymoon is over, and the time has come for decisive action against militancy.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 27, 2024

'Source of terror'

ALTHOUGH dealing with the presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan is a major political, security and strategic challenge for Pakistan, leaving the problem unattended is not advisable, as terrorist outfits will continue their bloody campaign in this country unless they are firmly confronted.

It is clear that going after militant groups inside Afghanistan unilaterally presents its own set of difficulties and risks a further deterioration in ties with the ruling Afghan Taliban, and the loss of whatever leverage Pakistan may have with them. In this regard, the defence minister's recent comments reflect the state's frustration with the Afghan Taliban. Taking to X, Khawaja Asif termed Afghanistan "the source of terrorism" in Pakistan, adding that counterterrorism "cooperation from Kabul ... is not available".

Pakistan has few good options at the moment. However, the use of diplomatic channels with Afghanistan should not be abandoned, while the state should make it plain that all militant groups wreaking havoc inside this country will be dealt with decisively. Though the Afghan Taliban consistently deny their soil is being used by terrorists, the international community is quite clear that militants are active inside Afghanistan.

At a briefing of the UN Security Council earlier this month, the secretary general's special representative for Afghanistan observed that the country "has long been the source of instability and terrorism", and noted that "there are well-founded concerns over the presence of terrorist groups" inside Afghanistan, including IS and TTP.

Pakistan has made these very same arguments before the world. Furthermore, in some media reports Taliban officials have admitted there are "places that might be out of our control" on the border area with Pakistan. If they want global legitimacy, then the Taliban must establish order over these 'out of control' areas, and the international community, including Afghanistan's neighbours, should be willing to help Kabul's counterterrorism effort.

Yet it is also true that the Afghan Taliban and the TTP are of the same ideological stock, so expecting the former to crush the latter is naïve. What the Taliban can, indeed must, do is to ensure that the TTP does not harm Pakistan. If Kabul's rulers fail on this count, then there will be genuine reason to believe they are tacitly supporting the TTP's terrorist activities.

As has been written in these columns earlier, along with bilateral engagement, all of Afghanistan's neighbours – particularly Pakistan, Iran, China, the Central Asian states and Russia – must coordinate their policies regarding militant groups in Afghanistan.

That way the Taliban will get the same message from all capitals, and hopefully, not repeat the mistakes they made in 2001. China, for example, has emphasised "patient communication with

Afghan authorities". This may be easier than the other limited options before Pakistan and Afghanistan's other neighbours.

SOURCE: DAWN, MARCH 29, 2024

Counterterrorism: Who is Tasked with Doing What?

DR SYED KALEEM IMAM



The National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) comes under the spotlight every time there is a terrorist incident. However, it seems it is still not widely understood that NACTA is supposed to be tasked solely with developing and executing a comprehensive strategy to combat terrorism, which includes coordinating intelligence sharing among agencies and creating policies to curb violent extremism and terrorism financing. Simply put, it is a body that formulates policy, reviews strategy and facilitates intelligence-sharing – nothing more.

Our second fallacy is that we fail to understand that the principal responsibility for action against terrorism falls squarely on law enforcement agencies, especially the Counterterrorism Department (CTD). The civil armed forces and then the military only step in for assistance if everything else falls. Till then, taking action remains the police's responsibility.

Unfortunately, in practice, the response to terrorism-related incidents has for long unfolded very differently. The armed forces and premier intelligence agencies often take the lead, while the CTD and police seem to play only secondary roles. Since the tactical and operational roles supposed

to be played respectively by the police and other security forces overlap, the police are often sidelined or forced to cede their space to other security entities.

It baffles me why we cannot grasp this modest concept: the police should remain at the forefront of the official response to terrorism, with NACTA playing a supporting role in intelligence sharing. If the police's performance leaves something to be desired, the logical solution is to enhance its capabilities, provide more resources and try to emulate prevailing best practices – not reinvent the wheel. Deviating from this framework is not only impractical, it has led to ineffective outcomes, as evidenced by the state's recent failings with respect to emergent security issues. It is curious that we still opt for complexity over simplicity and relish the convoluted rather than embrace the straightforward.

In this context, the recent calls to restructure NACTA are uncalled for, more so since they seem symptomatic of a temptation to bypass sustained, incremental improvement. The evolution of existing systems should be a pivotal goal, but it is often overlooked in favor of shiny flagship projects. Take, for instance, this new tendency to prioritize new 'facilitation centers' over adequately funding existing police stations. It illustrates a paradoxical approach to reform, as it advocates the creation of parallel institutions over improving existing ones. Conceptually and operationally, such strategies indicate a preference for superficial rather than substantive changes.

NACTA, established in 2008 with the purpose of tackling terrorism, has faced many obstacles, including legislative delays. The NACTA Act was only passed in 2013, and its leadership remained unstable, with thirteen heads changed since 2008 and the authority often running as a headless department. This rapid turnover not only undermined policy continuity but also impeded its strategic implementation.



NACTA held its first Board of Governors (BOG) meeting in 2018 – nearly 11 years after it was formed. While many operational challenges were raised at the time, the authority was seriously considered for closure over issues such as turf politics, a lack of resources and clear direction, and subpar presentations by the then NC. The NACTA Act has been amended since then to address some structural issues, including placing the BOG under the Ministry of Interior and expanding the Executive Committee. These changes have led to more regular BOG and executive committee meetings under the current NC, signaling a potential turnaround in functioning.

However, the question of whether NACTA should be led by the prime minister or the Interior Ministry has remained a matter of some contention, which is illustrative of the agency's unclear authority structure and the jurisdictional disputes it faces. It is incomprehensible that the Joint Intelligence Directorate would be shut down on whims after its operation was just about to start. And, though staffing issues have been partially addressed, with over 400 skilled officers now at NACTA's disposal, it continues to operate below capacity and faces challenges in staff compensation, with salaries the lowest among police departments since 2015. NACTA's primary challenge remains the reluctance of different organizations to share information. Each wants to claim credit for any success, which often leads to critical insights being withheld.

Despite all this, NACTA should never become another national Counterterrorism Department (CTD) focusing on direct action, such as arrests, raids, and prosecutions. Such a shift would erode its effectiveness and undermine the mission of intelligence gathering and tackling terrorism's root causes. The resurgence of terrorism, especially following the Afghan Taliban's ascension in 2021, underscores the extensive and diverse nature of the threats faced by Pakistan. A militarized approach, while sometimes necessary, falls short in urban settings, where robust civilian law enforcement is crucial.

The National Action Plan (NAP), reviewed in 2021, signaled a commitment to addressing these challenges, yet reform of the criminal justice system has lagged behind. Effective counterterrorism requires more than just NACTA's coordination: it demands adequate resources for civilian law enforcement and stringent implementation of the NAP. NACTA underperforms not because it lacks new initiatives, but because its foundational challenges have never fully been addressed. Restructuring such an organization without at least pushing it to its full potential first, therefore, seems unjust and premature. It is nonetheless essential to enhance NACTA and counterterrorism units' effectiveness through rigorous professional accountability.

SOURCE: EN.WENEWS.PK, MARCH 31, 2024

Two troops martyred in Gwadar gun attack

GWADAR: Two security personnel were martyred and four others injured in an attack at a bomb disposal squad of Pakistan Army in the Ankara Dam area, officials said.

The bomb disposal team of Pakistan Army was busy clearing landmines in the Ankara Dam area of Gwadar district when unidentified armed men opened indiscriminate fire on them.

Two soldiers were martyred on the spot receiving multiple bullet injuries and four others got injured.

“The firing incident took place some 25km from the port city [Gwadar], which claimed two lives and injured four others,” said Gwadar SSP Mohsin Zohaib, adding that after the incident the bodies and the injured were shifted to GDA hospital.

The deceased were identified as soldiers Zahoor and Altaf while the injured were Havildar Sajid Huss-ain, Sepoy Tajamul Huss-ain, Sepoy Ibrar Ahmed and Sepoy Gul Haider.

Security forces have launched a sea-rch operation in the area to trace the attackers.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 1, 2024

Balochistan, KP dominate violence landscape in first quarter

ISLAMABAD: During the first quarter of 2024, Pakistan witnessed 432 violence-linked fatalities and 370 injuries among civilians, security personnel, and outlaws, resulting from as many as 245 incidents of terror attacks and counter-terror operations.

This includes 281 fatalities among civilians and security forces personnel.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan provinces, both bordering Afghanistan, accounted for over 92 per cent of all fatalities and 86pc of attacks (including incidents of terrorism and security forces operations) during this period. Individually, the former suffered 51pc and the latter 41pc of all fatalities in the first quarter of 2024.

The data indicates that the remaining regions were relatively peaceful, suffering less than 8pc of all fatalities.

Interestingly, militant organisations claimed responsibility for less than 20pc of the total casualties attributed to terrorism in the first quarter of 2024.

A new militant group named Jabhat Ansar al-Mahdi Khorasan (JAMK), affiliated with the Gul Bahadur group, has emerged.

These are the key findings of the security report issued by the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS).

In addition to the casualties of terrorism and counter-terrorism, there were 64 incidents of sabotage in the country targeting properties of the government, politicians, private, and security properties.

In the first quarter, Balochistan recorded a staggering 96pc surge in violence, with fatalities jumping to 178 from 91 in the last quarter of 2023.

Sindh saw a nearly 47pc rise in violence, though the number of fatalities was very low. However, the regions of KP, Punjab, and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) recorded encouraging decreases in violence by 24pc, 85pc, and 65pc, respectively.

Despite a notable decrease in violence observed in GB during the period under review, the GB home minister issued a terror threat alert on March 31, 2024, regarding the possibility of attacks by the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

The alert came following a suicide attack on a convoy of Chinese engineers in the Shangla district of KP who were working on the Dasu Dam project, resulting in the deaths of five Chinese

nationals and a local driver. It's worth noting that last year, GB suffered the highest number of fatalities in a decade, with 17 lives lost, the report stated.

In the first quarter of the current year, civilians and security forces personnel suffered over 65pc (281) of all fatalities in nearly 200 terror attacks, compared to outlaws suffering only 35pc (151) in around 48 counter-terror operations.

The attacks on security officials and civilians outnumbered the security operations conducted against the outlaws by almost fourfold. Moreover, civilians bore the heaviest brunt of violence, suffering 154 fatalities (36pc), which is more than any other category of victims, thus emerging as the primary victims of violence in this period.

Compared to the last quarter of 2023, the fatalities of civilians and security officials combined surged by 17pc, whereas the fatalities of outlaws, militants, and insurgents combined decreased by almost 15pc in the first quarter of 2024.

Individually, there was a significant increase in the number of insurgents' fatalities, by 215pc, and a decrease of approximately 33pc in militants' fatalities.

Surprisingly, certain terrorist outfits such as the banned Tehreek-i-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), Lashkar-i-Islami (LI), and Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LeJ), which were highly active the previous year, have abstained from claiming any acts of terrorism this quarter. Only the TTP and the militant Islamic State group, or Daesh, have claimed responsibility for some attacks.

Although the banned TTP claimed responsibility for only three terror attacks in Pakistan in the first quarter, resulting in four fatalities, an unclaimed terror incident occurred in North Waziristan on March 16, 2024, which led to the tragic loss of seven security officials, including a lieutenant-colonel and a captain.

The insurgent banned groups, Balochistan Liberation Army, Baloch Liberation Front, Baloch Raaji Ajoi Sangar, and Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army, claimed responsibility for 18 attacks (three times more than the claims of the militant groups) in the first quarter, causing 42 fatalities and 40 injuries. The prime targets of the insurgent groups were the security and government installations, including Gwadar Port Complex, Mach Jail, and Turbat Naval Base.

In the first quarter, eight incidents of sectarian violence were reported, impacting all religious communities, including Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Among the non-Muslim communities, Ahmadis endured the highest casualties (9), while three fatalities occurred among Shias due to violence. Additionally, a Sunni was also targeted in an act of violence.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 1, 2024