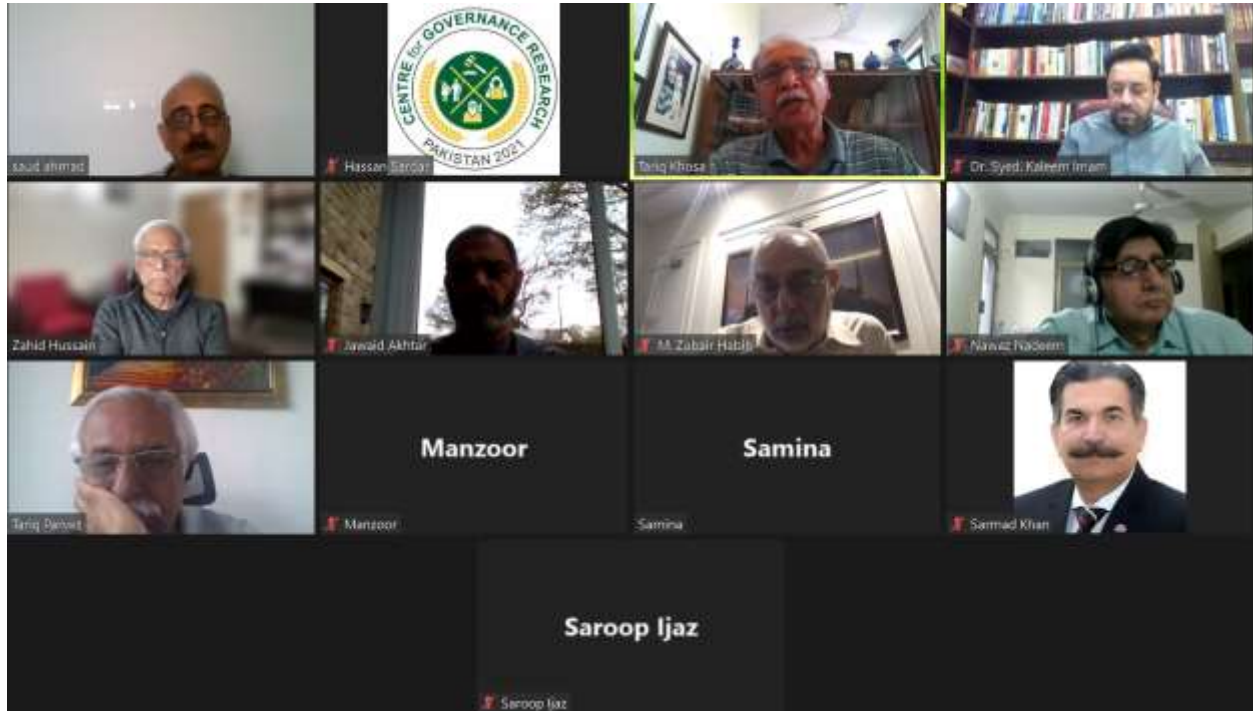


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NIOC's 47th Advisory Board Meeting



The 47th Advisory Board Meeting was held on 19 April 2024.

Present Board Members: Tariq Parvez, Zahid Hussain, Samina Ahmed, Manzoor Ahmad, Zubair Habib, and Jawaid Akhtar

NIOC Directorate: Tariq Khosa, Sarmad Khan, Saud Mirza, Kaleem Imam, Saroop Ijaz, Nawaz Nadeem, and Hassan Sardar

- 1) GI-TOC Observatory for South Asia and Central Asia: Director NIOC informed about his appointment at the Geneva-based board of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) in February 2024, for a 3-year term. He also informed about GI-TOC's Observatory/Hub in South Asia and Central Asia. Vienna-based John Collins is the lead on behalf of GI-TOC. In initial discussions held between GI-TOC and CGR-NIOC, a collaborative partnership was conceived in the near future, involving a trilateral framework between GI-TOC, NIOC and Beaconhouse National University (BNU), Lahore. GI-TOC is also going to work on a 5-year Project for Pakistan on Trafficking in Persons (TIP).
- 2) Director CGR Tariq Khosa presented a Paper on the Impact of Illicit Weapons Smuggling in Pakistan, at an international conference at the University of Milan, Italy on 12 April 2024. The Paper was formally released in Pakistan as well.

- 3) A Position Paper on IS-K as a Global Threat will soon be written by Zahid Hussain and released by the CGR, to be followed by discussions with The Khorasan Diary (TKD), and BNU.
- 4) A list of NIOC Network of National Experts was shared by the Director. Views of the Advisory board were sought about the initiative.
- 5) A list of CSOs as members of the Civil Society Alliance (CSA) on UNTOC Review Process was also shared, seeking recommendations for adding more member organizations, interested in combating serious and organized crime in Pakistan.

DSP among 3 police officials martyred in separate Lakki Marwat attacks



A deputy superintendent of police (DSP) and a constable were martyred on Friday night when unknown attackers opened fire on their vehicle in Lakki Marwat, an official said.

DSP Gul Muhammad and Constable Nadeem Gul had set up a temporary checkpoint at the Manjiwala Chowk near the Indus Highway when unknown assailants opened fire on their vehicle, killing both, according to Bannu police spokesperson Bashir Khan.

The bodies were shifted to the Tehsil Headquarters Hospital in the Sarai Naurang district of Lakki Marwat.

That same night, in a separate incident in the Sara Darga district of Lakki Marwat, Constable Sanamat Khan was martyred when unknown assailants opened fire at him near his house. He was stationed in Miranshah, North Waziristan and had returned home on leave.

The assailants in both incidents are at large.

On Saturday morning, funeral prayers for the martyred police officials were held with official honours at Iqbal Shaheed Police Line in Bannu.

District Police Officer (DPO) Bannu Ziauddin Ahmed, DPO Lakki Marwat Taimur Khan, SP Operation Bannu Sanaullah and army officers laid flower wreaths on the coffins of the martyred and prayed for them.



A post on X of two of the martyred police officials. – KP Police

DPO Ahmed praised the martyrs as being brave, dutiful and noble, adding that the Bannu police stand with the bereaved families in their hour of grief.

“We are proud of such young people who died fighting bravely,” he said.

“The blood of the martyrs will not go in vain,” DPO Ahmed said, adding that “terrorists will not demoralise us with cowardly acts.”

DPO Khan said police forces have, in the past, sacrificed their lives for the country, which the entire nation values.

The attacks are the latest in a series of incidents targeting police officials in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

On Tuesday, six policemen were injured when unknown miscreants attacked them in the Township area of Bannu.

In March, two traffic police constables were martyred when unknown motorcyclists opened fire on them in Darra Pezu town in Lakki Marwat.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 6, 2024

Eight terrorists killed by security forces in Dera Ismail Khan operation

Security forces conducted an intelligence-based operation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Dera Ismail Khan district and killed eight suspected terrorists, according to a statement issued by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR).

"During the conduct of the operation, after an intense fire exchange, eight terrorists were killed," it read.

The ISPR statement said: "The killed terrorists remained actively involved in numerous terrorist activities against the security forces and target killing of innocent civilians. Weapons, ammunition and explosives were also recovered from killed terrorists."

ISPR stated that a "sanitisation operation" was under way to eliminate other terrorists in the area, adding: "Security forces are determined to wipe out the menace of terrorism from the country." "Locals of the area appreciated the operation."

Two soldiers were martyred after a suicide bomber struck a military convoy on Tank Road in the same district a fortnight ago. Police said the attack also injured at least 22 personnel.

According to a police report, the convoy was on its way to Tank from Dera Ismail Khan when a suicide bomber rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into the convoy, resulting in the martyrdom of two soldiers on the spot and injuries to almost two dozen others.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif expressed his unwavering commitment to wiping out terrorism. According to state broadcaster Radio Pakistan, the premier said the war against terrorism would continue until the menace was completely eradicated from the country.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 6, 2024

Is 'ISIS' still a global threat?

BY EJAZ HAIDER



PROLOGUE

On April 23, 2015, Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, head of Tajikistan's Interior Ministry's elite special forces unit (a counter-terrorism unit), failed to show up for a meeting with the interior minister.

No one had seen him for three days. His phone was switched off. His wife was contacted. She claimed that, for some time, Khalimov had been living with his second wife. When his second wife was contacted, she said that Khalimov had told her he was going off on a mission for a few days. She told the officials that was all she knew.

The news quickly spread. The head of the special forces, a high-ranking officer, a man close to President Emomali Rahmon's family, had disappeared. Rumours abounded. Had Khalimov joined the political opposition and taken refuge in the mountains? Had he fallen out with Rahmon's son and been eliminated. Yes, that's possible in Tajikistan, a family autocracy that is highly repressive.

Independent journalists began to investigate. Abdusalim Khalimov, the father of Gulmurod, living in their village in the Varzob district, said he had no idea where his son was, saying, "It's been a month. I don't know what happened. A soldier came and asked me questions. I don't know anything about it." Weeks went by without any news. Finally, the news broke.

On May 28, Central Asia TV network revealed that Khalimov had been found. He was in Syria, with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The channel ran a video clip by Khalimov. The message was recorded in Russian and addressed all Muslims in Russia and the former Soviet republics. "Brothers are waiting to enter Tajikistan and Russia and establish shariah," the message said.

Later reports indicated that Khalimov had fled with 10 others to Turkey via Russia and then entered Syria from Turkey. Tajik authorities refused to comment on Khalimov's desertion. Arkady Dubnov, a Russian expert on Central Asia with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said Khalimov's video was authentic.

On September 8, 2017, a little over two years after Khalimov joined ISIS, Russian channels reported that he had been killed in an airstrike near Deir ez Zour. By then, Khalimov had risen rapidly through the ISIS ranks and had become the group's minister for war. As a former officer, he had been trained both by Russia's elite Spetsnaz and, later, by the American military contractor company, the infamous Blackwater.

Khalimov's death has never been confirmed by Tajikistan. The country's most wanted list still contains Khalimov's name and photograph. During his absence from Tajikistan, two of his brothers, a nephew and a neighbour were killed by Tajik security forces, some 30 kilometres from the Tajik-Afghan border. The security forces claimed that they were part of an ISIS cell and were planning to cross over into Afghanistan. Khalimov's elder son from his first wife was also arrested on terrorism charges and later killed during a prison riot. He was 20.

How is ISIS relevant anymore, especially after being evicted from the territories it once controlled in Syria and Iraq? This question can be answered depending on what lens one is using and what is considered as constituting an ISIS threat.

The core group's military capability to capture territory has been badly dented in Syria and Iraq, at much human and material cost. It is unlikely that the group will regain a territorial foothold anywhere anytime soon. That's good news.

The bad news is that, having lost its self-styled caliphate in Syria and Iraq, it has splintered into various franchises, its activities have been driven underground and it now relies on classic terrorist attacks to remain relevant in a competitive jihadi ecosystem. Those tactics and the so-called Islamic State's (IS) continued quest to find ungoverned spaces within weak states mean, however, that the group and its ideology remain a threat.



The ISKP has carried out several targeted attacks against the JUI-F, such as the one pictured above, which took place in Mastung on September 14, 2023

MOSCOW ATTACK: WHY RUSSIA?

On March 22, 2024 a group of four or five terrorists attacked the Crocus City Hall outside Moscow. Armed with AK assault rifles, the attackers kept firing into the crowd, stopping only to reload. At some point, one or two of them also poured gasoline in one part of the building and set it on fire.

The attack, the rampage and the fire, which collapsed part of the hall, left 140 Muscovites dead and nearly 80 injured. While IS's Middle East core took responsibility for the attack, US intelligence reports indicate the attack was planned and executed by the so-called Islamic State's 'Khorasan Province' franchise, ISKP.

Russia has been in the jihadi crosshairs since Soviet times. The war in Afghanistan catalysed the break-up of the Soviet Union and also introduced the jihadi struggle into long-repressed Muslim Soviet Republics of the Soviet Union. The Central Asian Republics, especially Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, have been troubled by Islamist groups since the early '90s.

The area of the Ferghana Valley, shared by Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, has been particularly susceptible to such influences. That's where Juma Namangani, a former Uzbek Soviet paratrooper who had fought in Afghanistan, created the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, along with Tahir Yaldashev. Namangani had also fought in Tajikistan's civil war. He was killed in an airstrike in November 2001, during the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, while Yaldashev was killed in a US Predator drone strike in 2009 in Zhob, Balochistan.

The situation in the '90s was given a fillip by Russia's two wars in Chechnya, especially the second Russo-Chechen War of 1999. The wars also exposed Russia to Chechen and Dagestani militant attacks. The Chechen insurgency itself split into nationalists and global jihadis. Chechen women, shahidkas (Black Widows), introduced suicide bombing, starting in the noughties. They staged many high-profile attacks, including eight of the 10 suicide bombings in the Russian capital.

Russia's military and diplomatic help to Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria has also been a reason for reprisal attacks by IS. On September 6, 2022, an ISKP suicide bomber blew himself up outside the Russian embassy in Kabul. The attack killed six people, including two members of Russian embassy staff.

Russia has also taken a forward-leaning security posture since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, including through military presence in Tajikistan, where it also holds joint counter-terrorism and military exercises with Tajikistan.

The Syria war informs IS's memory, especially the defeat and the group's dislodging from the territory. IS attacks inside Iran are seen as revenge for Tehran and its proxies' anti-ISIS role in Syria and Iraq. This explains the ISKP attack in January this year in Kerman, Iran, at the anniversary commemoration of Maj Gen Qasem Soleimani, who was instrumental in Iran's operations in Syria and Iraq. The attack killed over 90 people and left over a hundred injured.

Prior to both attacks, the US had warned Iran and Russia of imminent extremist attacks. Russian President Vladimir Putin is reported to have dismissed the warning, accusing the US of sowing fear. Putin has since been pushing the line about Ukraine's involvement in the attack, a charge that has been rejected by Kyiv.

In the meantime, Russian security agencies have also arrested four Tajik nationals. When produced before the court, they showed visible signs of torture. Many experts believe Russia may not have the right perpetrators of the attack.

WHY IS TAJIKISTAN VULNERABLE?

Radicalisation among some Muslim communities in Central Asia dates back to the early '90s. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, nearly a century of repressed religious sentiment rose among societies that, in many cases, had remained traditional and backward.

The Afghanistan jihad also played a major role in galvanising the new Islamist spirit. The post-Soviet Central Asian Republics also failed to deliver democratic governance and economic progress, most having been captured by former communists, who converted party rule into dynastic rule.

The twin processes of radicalisation and repression are particularly acute in Tajikistan, the region's poorest country. One report quoted the country's president, Rahmon, as saying that, "In the last three years, 24 Tajiks have committed or planned terrorist attacks in 10 countries." There are reasons for this radicalisation.

Immediately after independence, Tajikistan was plunged into a civil war (1992–1997), leaving nearly 100,000 dead. Rahmon has ruled the country since 1994 and, once he is gone, the presidential office will pass on to Rustam Emomoli, his son.

The social and economic situation in Tajikistan is the worst in Central Asia, with the country ranking 162 in the world by GDP per capita index, according to International Monetary Fund estimates. Nearly 70 percent of Tajiks live in rural areas and the communities practise child marriage and polygamy. Ethnic Russians, who comprised about 7.5 percent of the population in 1989, have mostly emigrated, with only about 30,000 remaining in Tajikistan. That has also brought down the female employment ratio. Female unemployment, in any case, is common in the country.

By most accounts, while poverty and inequality remain rampant, digitisation and digital networks have served to exacerbate the sense of injustice. It also exposes the population to extremist views.

The Rahmon family and the ruling clique of his lieutenants are fabulously rich, a sharp contrast to the state of the country's economy. Politically, Rahmon has done everything to destroy all opposition, to the point where the people have no legal-constitutional means to fight excesses and injustices. Radicalisation, as expat Tajik experts point out, is the only path open to many.

As one report put it, "International terrorist groups have long looked on Tajikistan as a fertile recruiting ground. Media outlets affiliated with [ISKP] produce content in the Tajik language. They publish religious material and political tracts criticising Rahmon for being too close to Russia, for his authoritarianism, and for not being religious enough. [ISKP] also runs Tajik-language Telegram channels and TikTok accounts."



Members of IS pictured following their surrender to the Afghan government on November 17, 2019: by 2019, the ISKP had begun to lose territory to the Afghan army and the Taliban – but the group has proved to be resilient and has been able to mount a number of operations inside Afghanistan.

DID ISIS END IN IRAQ AND SYRIA?

From roughly 2014 to 2017, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – also known as ISIL or Daesh – held about a third of the territory of Syria and 40 percent of Iraq's. By December 2017, it had lost 95 percent of its territory, including its two biggest properties, Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, and the Northern Syrian city of Raqqa, its nominal capital.

Unlike Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups, ISIS did nothing to hide itself and its activities. Not only did it believe in capturing territory and establishing a caliphate, it presented its exploits to the world through social media messages and video clips. Nor did it hide its recruitment drive. Its tactics were grounded in the theories expounded in the book *Management of Savagery* by an author who called himself Abu Bakr Naji.

At one point, Naji writes: "The great 'power' and that which causes the enemy to reflect one thousand times [is] a result of the 'powers' of the groups, whether they are groups of 'vexation' or groups of administration in the regions of savagery. The tie of religious loyalty between all of these groups is embodied in a covenant written in blood. The most important clause (of this covenant) is: 'Blood for blood and destruction for destruction.' Attaining a great 'power' makes the enemy unable to oppose it."

As should be clear, this passage explains how IS responds to any attack by treating it as an attack against a unified group and body, the unified body being IS itself, whose struggle must continue unceasingly against infidels, both Muslims (those who oppose its exegetical worldview) and non-Muslims. The text remains central to IS operations and continues to inform its exceptional brutality.

While multiple state and non-state actors managed to defeat ISIS in Syria and Iraq, after the final battle in Syria – fought in February 2019 at the town of Baghuz Fawqani near Deir ez Zaur, where Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces managed to dislodge ISIS fighters through a series of ground assaults supported by the US-led coalition – hundreds of ISIS fighters managed to flee the Iraq-Syria theatre. Experts believe many went underground and have spread out. Dozens of them are also said to have reached Afghanistan.

ISKP AND THE TALIBAN

Islamic State Khorasan Province is one of the most important branches of IS. Its reference to Khorasan comes from what, in Islamic eschatology, is called 'The Hadith of Black Flag' – a hadith that is much debated and equally controversial, both in its provenance and its interpretation.

ISKP's formation was announced in January 2015 by the then-Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani. According to sources and reports at the time, the group was formed after months of negotiations between the IS leadership and terrorist factions in Afghanistan and Pakistan's outlawed Taliban factions. Splinter factions of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) were active in ISKP and its first leader, Hafiz Saeed Orakzai, was a former TTP commander.

At the time of its formation, the group was based in the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar. It operated on multiple fronts: against the US-supported Afghan government's coalition troops,

against the Afghan Taliban and against Shia populations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Gradually, the ISKP spread out into other areas: Kunar, Herat, Samangan, Kunduz, Jawzjan and Kabul. Notably, it also attacked and killed scholars and clerics who it considered to be against its creed.

By 2019, ISKP had begun to lose territory to the Afghan army and the Taliban. The US-supported defunct Afghan government even claimed, in late 2019, of having decimated the group. A similar claim was made by the Afghan Taliban in 2020. But the group has proved to be resilient and, despite counter-terrorism operations by the Afghan Taliban since the US withdrawal, it has been able to mount a number of operations inside Afghanistan and also Pakistan.

Following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, and despite the Tehreek-i-Taliban Afghanistan (TTA) operations against the ISKP, the latter has continued to expand its activities. During this period, intelligence sources indicate that the ISKP has also begun to target Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, in terms of attacks and recruitment.

As one report put it, "Following rocket strikes on Uzbekistan in April 2022, ISKP's Voice of Khorasan magazine capitalised on the momentum, threatening to smash Afghanistan's northern borders 'as witnessed by the world when the Islamic State broke down the borders between Iraq and Sham [Syria] while crushing the Sykes-Picot [Agreement] under our feet.'"

As part of its strategy, the ISKP also appeals to jihadi sentiments by presenting the TTA as a Pashtun nationalist movement rather than a religious-jihadi force. To this end, they refer to the TTA's negotiations with the Americans and their diplomatic outreach to the US, Russia, China, the Central Asian republics and others, accusing the TTA of wanting to subordinate Afghanistan to the interests of foreign powers, instead of working towards establishing a caliphate.

It is no coincidence that most jihadi texts refer to the secret 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement that carved out the Ottoman Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) territories into British and French mandates (spheres of influence).

The TTA is aware of this propaganda approach and is also wary of this. For instance, in Pakistan's talks with TTA leaders on the thorny issue of the TTP, TTA leaders have, on more than one occasion, expressed the fear that, if they were to press the TTP beyond a certain point, they (TTA) run the risk of driving TTP factions into ISKP's arms.

This fear is not entirely unfounded, since the ISKP originally comprised many fighters from the TTP's splinter factions. However, it could well be a ruse, because the rift between the TTP and the ISKP has also been deepening, especially since the return to power of the TTA.

The TTP had publicly condemned the ISKP suicide attack in Bajaur on July 30, 2023, which targeted a political rally by the Deobandi Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam party of Maulana Fazlur Rehman (JUI-F). In fact, to retain their own Islamist credentials and undermine the Pakistani state's counter-terrorism operations against itself, the TTP has been trying to brand the ISKP as a group supported by Pakistani intelligence agencies, a charge that is both perfidious and utterly bogus.

At the same time, just like the TTA, the TTP also downplays the threat from the ISKP, partly to offset external pressure, but mostly to present the TTA as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, which effectively controls the territory of that country.

THE 'ISLAMIC STATE' STRATEGY

As the world's primary attention has moved on to emerging interstate rivalries and conflicts, the problem of IS and other such groups – including criminal gangs like in Haiti and Nigeria – continues to simmer. For IS, the most important strategy, after having lost territory in Iraq and Syria, is to find opportunities for high profile attacks, including but not confined to, Western capitals.

The Moscow attack has to be seen in that light. This strategy not only allows IS to stay relevant, but also makes it a tough competitor for other non-state actors and groups. The changing world ecosystem helps it find spaces, especially ungoverned ones, where it can thrive and from where it can operate.

While the frequency of ISKP attacks inside Pakistan have come down, even as attacks by the TTP and Baloch terrorist groups have spiked, the ISKP threat has not gone away. The ISKP would, whenever a possibility arises, target security forces, civilians – especially Shia and non-Muslim Pakistanis – as well as religious scholars that it considers to be “heretical”.

GLOBAL CHALLENGES AND GEOPOLITICS

In his 2017 award-winning book *The Allure of Battle: A History of How Wars Have Been Won and Lost*, military historian Cathal J Nolan writes, “The allure of battle would matter little had not the long wars it led to altered the course of world history in conflicts of prolonged destruction and suffering, in wars... that lasted many years or even many decades.”

Humans seek clarity. The desire for a decisive battle to end violence and achieve security – what the Germans called *Entscheidungsschlacht* – is therefore understandable. When dealing with complexity, we try to parse and find that one factor that can solve the puzzle for us.

On September 14, 2001, then-US President George W Bush signed off on America's National Security Strategy, detailing the conduct of what was then called the 'Global War on Terror'. While the strategy conceded that “the struggle against global terrorism is different from any other war in our history”, it nonetheless expressed the confidence that “progress will come through the persistent accumulation of successes.”

Since then, much has changed but has also remained unchanged. The ability of terrorist groups to target the US has diminished, but the periphery remains unstable. These groups have continued to spawn regional franchises that continue to keep states in West and Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel destabilised.

The situation is exacerbated by civil wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Sudan etc. Other states, such as Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, remain weak for a number of reasons, providing ideal ecosystems for the resurgence of terrorist groups.

Four Strategic Challenges

The post-Cold War era and the American unipolar moment are over. A global competition is underway between the United States and China and, to a lesser extent, between Russia and the US. The Russo-Ukraine War will continue to keep Ukraine and, with it, Europe destabilised. The ongoing genocide in Gaza and the Occupied Palestinian Territories is fast driving a wedge between America and what has come to be loosely described as the Global South.

Democracies, even in the developed world, are witnessing the rise of majoritarianism, along religious and ethno-racial faultlines. These developments, especially in regions with historical conflicts, are likely to spill over.

Emerging technologies, especially artificial intelligence and its military applications, present another challenge. So far, there are no international legal mechanisms to govern and regulate research and development in these technologies. Combined with the unintended consequences of what these technologies might entail, the world faces a number of security, legal and moral-ethical challenges and dilemmas.

Multiple reports by top scientists across the world have made it clear that states and societies face an impending climate disaster. This necessitates global cooperation which, given various factors, is hard to come by. Climate change would lead to water shortages, food insecurity, rise of communicable diseases and energy shortages. Conflicts will further increase the severity of the situation and result in disruptions of global supply chains and increases in international commodity prices.

This will result in a dispiriting cycle of geopolitics impacting these shared challenges and these challenges, in turn, impacting geopolitics negatively. These shared challenges are not marginal issues secondary to geopolitics. They are at the very core of national and international security and must be addressed with great urgency.

Unfortunately, we will have to tackle these challenges within a competitive international environment, where heightened geopolitical competition, nationalism and populism render this cooperation even more difficult and will require us to think and act in new ways.

SOURCE: DAWN, EOS, APRIL 7, 2024

Beyond rhetoric

THE deadly terrorist attack targeting Chinese workers in Bisham last month has clearly caused a stir within the civilian and military leadership.

Yet while the incident captured global attention as foreigners were targeted, the fact is that hundreds of Pakistanis have been losing their lives to militant violence, particularly in KP and Balochistan, in the ongoing wave of terrorism. In view of this grim reality, the prime minister on Friday decided to take the bull by the horns and himself oversee the national counterterrorism effort. Shehbaz Sharif called for regular audits of security SOPs, while reiterating the state's resolve to provide adequate protection to Chinese workers involved in various projects in the country. He also highlighted the need to improve the performance of provincial CT departments.

It is welcome that the prime minister has realised the gravity of the situation, and himself decided to address the threat of terrorism. But Pakistan at this juncture requires more than rhetoric and noble intentions to defeat the ogre of terrorism. The complexity of the terrorist threat in the country requires a well-oiled counterterrorism machinery with sufficient autonomy to neutralise malign actors before they carry out their deadly plans. As mentioned, militants have kept up their campaign of terror with steady momentum, particularly targeting law enforcers and security personnel.

Just on Friday, a police officer providing security cover to a polio team was martyred in South Waziristan, while in Lakki Marwat, three policemen lost their lives in separate attacks. As per figures published in the media, there were nearly 100 militant attacks in February, and 93 in January, resulting in at least 177 fatalities in the first two months of the year. The state can ill afford to ignore these dire numbers.

With regard to the prime minister's renewed resolve to fight terror, it should be stated that both the ideological basis – in the form of the revised National Action Plan – as well as the operational framework – in the form of Nacta – already exist to achieve this aim.

What is needed is the total commitment of the state to get the job done. This would require both the centre and the provinces, as well as the civilian and military arms of the state, to work in tandem in the fight against terrorism. As this paper has argued before, Nacta is the best forum for a coordinated response. The interior minister recently spoke of breathing new life into the agency; time is of the essence, and the sooner this is done, the better. Moreover, along with kinetic measures, which are essential, the long-term solutions, as envisaged in NAP, to counter extremism and terrorism lie in deradicalisation and addressing the root causes – primarily injustice, poverty and deprivation – that compel ordinary people to join militant outfits.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 7, 2024

2 terrorists killed in exchange of fire with security forces in North Waziristan

Two terrorists were killed in an exchange of fire between security forces and militants in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's North Waziristan district, the military's media affairs wing said.

A press release from the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that a fire exchange took place between terrorists and security forces.

"Own troops effectively engaged the terrorists' location as a result of which two terrorists were sent to hell. Weapons and explosives were also recovered from them," it said.

"Weapons and explosives were also recovered from them," it said.

"Sanitisation operation is being conducted 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," it said.

A day earlier, security forces killed 10 terrorists in two operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Meanwhile, two terrorists were killed in an intelligence-based operation in Balochistan's Panjgur district.

Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terror activities, 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 recently issued by the Centre for Research and Security Studies, 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 during the first quarter of 2024.

KP and Balochistan, 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 report said.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 7, 2024

Adopting technology to tackle crimes

BY GOHAR ALI KHAN



KARACHI: The implementation of the five-phase fully fledged Karachi Safe City (KSC) project worth Rs36 billion could tackle 90% of crimes in the port city as the adoption of technology is unavoidable for eliminating street crimes while making the city safe for businesses and investments, according to top officials and business leaders.

The KSC project is a far more modern, bigger project than both Islamabad Safe City and Lahore Safe City projects.

The Sindh government took almost eight years to adopt it as its Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah approved funding of around Rs5.6 billion last month to launch first phase of the project in the red zone and airport corridor on a government-to-government basis between the Sindh Police and the National Radio and Telecommunication Corporation (NRTC) under the Ministry of Defence Production.

Sindh Safe Cities Authority (SSCA) Director General Asif Aijaz Shaikh and NRTC Managing Director Brigadier Asim Ishaque signed the agreement.

For better fund management, the project has been divided into five phases and it will be executed on a turnkey basis. Each phase is not dependent on any other phase. Phase-wise details cover respective districts.

The KSC project is aimed at installing 12,000 cameras in all five phases across 2,400 sites. This extensive surveillance network will generate vast amounts of data, facilitating quick analysis and enhancing the efficiency of law enforcement operations.

The project's digital forensics component will further aid in the investigation and analysis of incidents while establishing a robust crime prevention system.

"The new system is designed with scalability. By harnessing digital technology and AI-based analytics, the KSC project is set to revolutionise public safety and security management. The initiative's success is bolstered by the expertise of SI Global Solutions. Through this project, Karachi is poised to become a model of how technology can be leveraged to create safer urban environments," Noman Said, eminent international safe cities consultant, said.

Enhancing urban security is to integrate state-of-the-art AI-based surveillance technology to create a secure environment. This involves deploying sophisticated surveillance tools that provide real-time data to improve situational awareness and emergency service delivery.

The KSC project embodies this vision through utilising facial recognition (FR), automatic number plate recognition (ANPR), and intelligent transportation systems (ITS) among other technologies. These will be linked to advanced command and control centres, enhancing public safety through crime prevention and efficient emergency response.

The project will deploy FR and ANPR to identify individuals and vehicles, aiding in crime prevention; tap ITS to monitor and manage traffic, reducing congestion and violations; leverage digital surveillance to enable predictive policing, helping law enforcement to preempt and address potential threats.

SSCA DG Asif Aijaz Shaikh said the five-phase KSC project was worth approximately Rs36 billion. The Sindh government is providing funds, the NRTC will execute it and Sindh Police under the SSCA will implement it.

He said entire Karachi had been surveyed and studied in terms of making it safe and secure. Local and security experts have studied and designed it to make it an impeccable project, while keeping the feed/data of cameras intact. Adopting technology can help combat and eliminate crimes nowadays.

After full-fledged execution of the first phase, the police will be able to reduce 50% of crimes in the entire port city. Sharea Faisal is important when a crime is committed. Once the entire project is completed, it will be able to mitigate 90% of crimes. The SSCA will expand the project to Sukkur, Hyderabad and other cities soon.

"Like the 15 police service, we have set up response teams of the project, headed by the Sindh inspector general of police (IGP). Our teams will also be helped by the 15 service, relevant police stations, Rangers and other law enforcement agencies to control crime."

The SSCA will initially have around 1,000 staff, 110 vehicles, 200 motorbikes and six drones. A plot spread over 5,000 square yards has been allocated for the SSCA complex on Sharea Faisal

near Saddar police station, where nine floors with a two-floor basement will be constructed within two years.

Three floors – second, third and fourth – have been selected for installing the largest screen of 50 by 80 feet in the country, he said.

The foundation of the SSCA complex will be laid in the middle of May and till then some poles will be erected with cameras. Until a proper building is built, the IGP has temporarily given one floor of the Command and Control Centre at the Central Police Office (CPO) where screens will be installed and solutions will be provided with the help of feed provided by the cameras. Once the complex is constructed, the equipment-cum-technology will be shifted there.

The first phase of the KSC project includes installation of 1,300 cameras including 1,043 new cameras and 257 upgraded cameras, and 300 poles. Till September-October, all cameras will be installed.

The KSC project consists of high-resolution cameras with top-notch capability of up to 12 megapixels, identifying suspicious activities including over-speeding of vehicles and giving two kinds of alerts once it detects weapons such as gun, knife, etc – safe alert for weapons carried by the police and red alert for weapons with other people.

The first phase will take 12 months and construction of the complex will take two years. Within a month, work will be visible. The NRTC will take one month for mobilisation as it has placed orders for cameras and equipment.

Once phase-II is approved, the ground work will kick off after two months of work on phase-I and so on. All the five phases will be completed within two and a half years, if inflation and the US dollar fluctuation do not hit the project cost and work is carried out expeditiously.

Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) Director and Citizen Police Liaison Committee (CPLC)'s former chief Ahmed Chinoy remarked that a successful implementation of the KSC project could bring about a revolution in Karachi as e-policing was the only solution to curbing the rising street crimes.

He called for the creation of more response units to apprehend the thugs forthwith. If crimes are eradicated, Karachi will be just like a piece of heaven for businesses as the country collects 67% of revenue from the city despite crimes.

“Once a criminal activity is detected, the teams must swing into action to nab criminals within minutes. This will ensure success of the system. The government must set a target to reduce the crime rate immediately and adopt a three-pronged approach – honest people, easy process and advanced technology,” industrialist and economic analyst Riazuddin said.

SOURCE: THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE, APRIL 8, 2024.

2 terrorists killed in intelligence-based operation in KP's South Waziristan

Two terrorists were killed in an intelligence-based operation (IBO) carried out by security forces in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's South Waziristan district, the military's media affairs wing said.

A press release from the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that two terrorists were successfully "neutralised and sent to hell" after an intense exchange of fire between security forces and militants.

The ISPR said that weapons, along with a large quantity of explosives, were also recovered from the slain militants, adding that they remained "actively involved in numerous terrorist activities in the area".

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

"Security forces of Pakistan are determined to wipe-out the menace of terrorism from the country," the ISPR concluded.

Last week, security forces killed 10 terrorists in two operations in KP. Meanwhile, two terrorists were killed in an intelligence-based operation in Balochistan's Panjgur district.

Two terrorists were also killed in an exchange of fire between security forces and militants in KP's North Waziristan district on Sunday.

Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terror activities, 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 recently issued by the Centre for Research and Security Studies, 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 during the first quarter of 2024.

KP and Balochistan, 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 report said.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 9, 2024

UN experts alarmed by lack of protection for minority girls from forced marriages, conversions

United Nations (UN) human rights experts have expressed dismay at the lack of protection for women and girls belonging to minority communities in Pakistan, saying that they remained vulnerable to forced marriages and conversions.

“Christian and Hindu girls remain particularly vulnerable to forced religious conversion, abduction, trafficking, child, early and forced marriage, domestic servitude and sexual violence,” the experts said in a statement issued in Geneva.

The experts included special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, Tomoya Obokata; special rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, Siobhan Mullally; special rapporteur on minority issues, Nicolas Levrat; special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea.

The chair of the working group on discrimination against women and girls, Dorothy Estrada Tanck, and members of the working group – Claudia Flores, Ivana Krstic, Haina Lu, and Laura Nyirinkindi – also joined the experts in voicing concern on the situation.

The special rapporteurs are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council. Special procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council’s independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world.

In the statement released on Thursday, the UN experts said: “The exposure of young women and girls belonging to religious minority communities to such heinous human rights violations and the impunity of such crimes can no longer be tolerated or justified.”

They also expressed concern that forced marriages and religious conversions of girls from religious minorities were “validated by the courts, often invoking religious law to justify keeping victims with their abductors rather than allowing them to return them to their parents”.

“Perpetrators often escape accountability, with police dismissing crimes under the guise of ‘love marriages’,” they said.

The experts stressed that child, early and forced marriages could not be justified on religious or cultural grounds. They underscored that, under international law, consent was irrelevant when the victim was a child under the age of 18.

In Pakistan, the legal marriage age for girls is 16 and 18 for boys.

“A woman’s right to choose a spouse and freely enter into marriage is central to her life, dignity and equality as a human being and must be protected and upheld by law,” the experts said.

They stressed the need for provisions to invalidate, annul or dissolve marriages contracted under duress, with due consideration for the women and girls concerned, and to ensure access to justice, remedy, protection and adequate assistance for victims.

“Notwithstanding the right of children to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in accordance with article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, change of religion or belief in all circumstances must be free, without coercion and undue inducements,” the UN experts said.

“The Pakistani authorities must enact and rigorously enforce laws to ensure that marriages are contracted only with the free and full consent of the intended spouses, and that the minimum age for marriage is raised to 18, including for girls,” the experts stated. adding that all “women and girls must be treated without discrimination, including those belonging to the Christian and Hindu communities”.

They urged Pakistan to bring perpetrators to justice, enforce existing legal protections against child, early and forced marriage, abduction and trafficking of minority girls, and uphold the country’s international human rights obligations.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 12, 2024

Gunmen abduct and kill 9 passengers from Punjab after ID check on bus near Balochistan's Noshki



Picture of the bus from which passengers were offloaded in Noshki before being killed.

Nine people from Punjab were killed near Noshki, Balochistan, when gunmen forced them off a bus they were travelling in and shot them, officials said. Another attack on a separate vehicle killed two people.

“About 10-12 gunmen blockaded the Quetta-Taftan Highway N-40 in the vicinity of Sultan Charhai near Noshki and abducted nine passengers from a bus,” Deputy Commissioner Habibullah Musakhel told Dawn.com.

The gunmen checked the identity cards of passengers from the Taftan-bound bus and kidnapped them, he added. They were subsequently shot dead.

The bodies of the abducted passengers were found under a bridge nearby after an hour and a half, Musakhel said. It's unclear whether their belongings were taken.

The nine victims were from Punjab, Noshki Station House Officer Asad Mengal told Dawn.com. The victims – all of whom were men – were from Wazirabad, Mandi Bahauddin, and Gujranwala, according to identity documents seen by Dawn.com.

In a separate attack on the same highway, a car that tried to force its way through the gunmen's cordon was fired upon, killing one passenger and injuring four, the SHO said.

When the car did not stop, the gunmen shot at the vehicle, bursting its tires. As a result, the vehicle overturned, SHO Mengal said. Two people, which police said were locals, were killed in the second attack. One of the car's passengers was a brother of provincial assembly member Ghulam Dastgir Badini, the SHO added.

Dawn.com's correspondent was able to confirm that both attacks were carried out at the same blockade.

The bodies of the victims were shifted to Quetta, Noshki Civil Hospital Medical Superintendent Zafar Mengal told Dawn.com.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attacks so far.

President Asif Ali Zardari condemned the attack and said the nation had "rejected the nefarious intentions" of the perpetrators.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif strongly condemned the attack and sought a report on the incident, according to Radio Pakistan.

He expressed his condolences to the victims' families, saying: "We stand with the bereaved families in this hour of grief."

The premier said the perpetrators of this incident of terrorism and their facilitators will be punished.

He also reaffirmed his commitment to wipe out the menace of terrorism from the root.

Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi said such acts could not be permitted in the country and no amount of condemnation would be enough for the incident.

Balochistan Chief Minister Mir Sarfraz Bugti expressed deep grief and sorrow over the sad incident, Radio Pakistan reported. He said terrorists would be dealt with iron hands and vowed that terrorists would not succeed in their nefarious designs.

Under Bugti's directives, the bodies of the victims were sent to their hometowns via ambulances from Edhi and the Pakistan Disaster Management Authority.

Addressing the media at the Chief Minister's House, CM Bugti said security plans would be revisited following the attack, adding that an inquiry was under way. "We are currently probing the incident, especially response times. If anyone has failed to uphold their responsibilities they will be held accountable."

He said that the government was open to dialogue with separatists to ensure a peaceful resolution to the ongoing insurgency. "If a situation can be resolved through dialogue, then 100 per cent we

are not against it," he said. "But, the writ of the state must be and will be enforced. If they (insurgents) want to keep committing acts of violence then we will come after you."

Past incidents

In October last year, unidentified gunmen fatally shot six labourers hailing from Punjab in Turbat in Balochistan's Kech district. The victims had been based in the house of a local contractor and were there for construction work when they became the target of the attack, District Police Officer (DPO) Imam Bux told Dawn.com

According to the police, the killings were targeted. All victims belonged to different areas of southern Punjab, suggesting they had been chosen for their ethnic background.

A similar incident occurred in 2015 when gunmen killed 20 construction workers and injured three others in a pre-dawn attack on a labourers' camp near Turbat.

"The labourers were sleeping in the camp when it was stormed by the assailants," Balochistan Home Secretary Akbar Hussain Durrani had told Dawn.

"Around 50 armed men riding two pickups and motorcycles descended on the camp at around 1:40am and opened fire on the workers," the commissioner of Makran division said.

Eight personnel of Levies Force were taken into custody for interrogation because, according to officials, they did not offer resistance to the attackers.

Bugti, who was provincial home minister at the time, had said they would face action for negligence.

"The victims belonged to Sindh and Punjab. They were working for a private construction company building a bridge over a stream in Gogdan, 15 kilometres from Turbat," he had said.

"The attackers were not Baloch. The labourers were killed by terrorists and terrorists have no caste, creed or religion," he said.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 13, 2024

Two soldiers martyred during intelligence-based operation in KP's Buner district



Lance Hawaldar Mudassar Mehmood Shaheed and Lance Naik Haseeb Javed Shaheed.

Two Pakistan Army soldiers were martyred in an intelligence-based operation (IBO), conducted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Buner district, based on the reported presence of suspected terrorists, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said in a statement.

According to ISPR, Lance Havildar Mudassar Mehmood and Lance Naik Haseeb Javed embraced martyrdom.

During the operation, a "high-value target" identified as Saleem Rabbani was "sent to hell" after an intense gun battle, while two other terrorists were injured, the statement added.

"[The] terrorist Saleem Rabbani remained actively involved in numerous terrorist activities against the security forces as well as extortion [and] target killings of innocent civilians," the press release read.

The ISPR stated that weapons, along with a large quantity of explosives, were also recovered from the slain militants in today's operation, adding that they remained "actively involved in numerous terrorist activities in the area".

The alleged terrorist Saleem had a bounty of Rs5 million placed on him and was wanted by law enforcement agencies and the government, the military's media wing said.

However, during the operation, two brave sons of the soil, Lance Havildar Mudassar Mehmood, 36, of Rawalpindi, and Lance Naik Haseeb Javed, 27, a resident of Poonch, having fought gallantly, embraced Shahadat [martyrdom], the ISPR stated.

According to additional information from the ISPR, Lance Havildar Mudassar and Lance Naik Haseeb served 16 and five years in the army, respectively.

A sanitisation operation is under way to eliminate any other terrorists found in the area, the press release said.

“Security forces of Pakistan remain determined to wipe out the menace of terrorism and such sacrifices of our brave soldiers further strengthen our resolve.”

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif lauded the security forces for the successful operation and expressed regret over those martyred.

Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi also paid tribute to the martyrs for their efforts in the operation.

This was the second such operation in KP this week, with two terrorists killed in an IBO in South Waziristan on Tuesday. A press release from the ISPR had said that two terrorists were successfully “neutralised and sent to hell” after an intense exchange of fire between security forces and militants.

Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terror activities, 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 recently issued by the Centre for Research and Security Studies, 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 during the first quarter of 2024.

KP and Balochistan, 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 report said.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 13, 2024

Noshki killings

THERE have been numerous incidents in Pakistan's history where innocent people have been singled out and murdered on the basis of their ethnic or confessional identity. The brutal massacre in Noshki, Balochistan, late Friday night is only the latest example of this grim trend. According to reports, armed militants had set up a blockade on the Quetta-Taftan highway, and after stopping a bus, forced nine passengers off the vehicle.

The victims' papers were checked and later, their bodies found under a bridge. All the victims hailed from different towns in Punjab. In a similarly grisly episode last October, six construction workers, also from Punjab, were massacred in Turbat while they were asleep. Meanwhile, aside from suspected Baloch separatists, sectarian terrorists have used similar methods to hunt down their victims. At least 29 Shia passengers were mowed down by Lashkar-i-Jhangvi terrorists after they were pulled off a bus in Mastung in 2011, while 20 passengers, also Shia, met a similar fate in the massacre on Babusar Top in 2012.

No cause can justify the slaying of innocent people in such a brutal manner. The BLA has claimed responsibility for the Noshki atrocity. Previously, too, Baloch militants have been suspected of carrying out attacks on 'outsiders' – mostly poor workers who have left their homes to provide for their families. This incident will hardly win sympathy for the separatists' cause, and, will, in fact, lead to revulsion at the brutality involved. Though terrorist acts carried out by militant groups are unacceptable, Balochistan's grievances are genuine. But the struggle to secure the province's legitimate rights must be peaceful and within the democratic framework. Murdering innocent non-Baloch workers and 'settlers' does a huge disservice to the struggle to secure constitutional rights for all of Balochistan's people.

Looking at the bigger picture, the Noshki killings highlight the varied threat militancy poses to the country's security. While religiously inspired groups are spearheading violent campaigns in KP and the north, Baloch separatists have created a state of insecurity in Balochistan. Left unattended, these separate but equally dangerous militant campaigns pose an immense national security threat. In Balochistan, the state has failed to control militancy despite maintaining an overwhelming security blanket across the province. It must be asked why Baloch separatists continue to target civilians as well as security men despite such large deployment.

The key to addressing militancy in Balochistan is two-pronged. Short-term measures must focus on neutralising armed actors who threaten the state and its citizens, including snapping any links with foreign backers that may be providing financial and logistical support to separatist outfits.

In the longer term, the poverty and deprivation that blight much of Balochistan must be addressed judiciously to stem the flow of recruits to the separatist cause.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 14, 2024

7 terrorists killed during infiltration attempt at Afghan-Pakistan border in North Waziristan

Seven terrorists were killed while trying to infiltrate the Afghan-Pakistan border in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's North Waziristan district, the military's media wing said.

A statement from the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that the movement of the seven-member group was detected on Tuesday by security forces in the general area of Spinkai, Ghulam Khan.

"The infiltrators were surrounded, effectively engaged and after an intense fire exchange, all seven territories were sent to hell. A large quantity of weapons, ammunition and explosives was also recovered," the ISPR said.

It added that Pakistan had consistently been asking the Afghan Taliban government to ensure effective border management on its side of the border.

The ISPR said that Afghan authorities were expected to fulfil their obligations and "deny the use of Afghan soil by terrorists for perpetuating acts of terrorism against Pakistan.

"Security forces of Pakistan are determined and remain committed to securing its borders and eliminating the menace of terrorism from the country."

A day ago, the military leadership was told that terrorists having sanctuaries in Afghanistan were "acting as proxies" against Pakistan and its economic interests, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Last month, fierce clashes had erupted between the two countries along the border, resulting in the martyrdom of one officer and injuries to three soldiers after Pakistan conducted air strikes inside Afghanistan using jets and unmanned drones to target militants linked to the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group.

Afghan government spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said Pakistani aircraft had carried out airstrikes in Paktika and Khost provinces along the border, killing eight people.

The ISPR had said that there was "clear evidence of involvement of terrorists from Afghanistan" in the Zhob Garrison attack in July 2023. It had added that "TTP (Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan) terrorists armed with the latest American weapons attacked two army check posts in Chitral" in September last year.

The military's media wing had said that the November attack on Mianwali Air Base was "also planned by the terrorists taking refuge in Afghanistan". It said that "terrorists from Afghanistan used night vision goggles and foreign weapons" in the Dera Ismail Khan attacks in December.

"There is clear evidence of the involvement of TTP terrorists who took refuge in Afghanistan in the terrorist incident in Tank on Dec 15, 2023," the ISPR stated.

The statement also said terrorists from Afghanistan were also involved in the Peshawar Police Lines blast in January 2023, which claimed more than 80 lives.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 17, 2024

5 customs officials martyred during intelligence-based operation in Dera Ismail Khan

Five customs officials were martyred during an intelligence-based operation (IBO) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Dera Ismail Khan district.

A press release from the Directorate General of Intelligence and Investigation Customs said the officials were ambushed by "unknown assailants in a dastardly attack and fired upon with automatic weapons" while conducting the IBO at Daraban Road near Saggiu village around 3:30pm.

"Despite all odds, they remained committed to their mission, serving the nation with honour and distinction. Their courage in the face of adversity serves as a shining example of gallantry," the statement said.

It identified the martyrs as intelligence officer Aslam Khan, Havalendars Inayat Ullah Khan and Akbar Zaman and Sepoys Iftikhar Alam and Shahab Ali.

"Pakistan Customs Service unflinchingly resolves to continue to serve Pakistan and contribute to the welfare of the nation," the press release said, adding that the department's officers and officials extended their condolences to the martyrs' heirs and families.

KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur strongly condemned the incident, expressed regret and directed the police to arrest the culprits and bring them to justice.

The chief minister extended his condolences to the bereaved families and offered prayers for them.

He directed that the best medical treatment be given to those injured in the incident.

KP government spokesperson Barrister Mohammad Ali Saif also strongly condemned the incident.

"Cowardly actions of miscreants can not shake the resolve of law enforcement agencies," he said.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 18, 2024

Different approach

BY ZAINAB MALIK

LAST month, UN Secretary General, António Guterres, called for “putting people first” in the global response to illicit drugs. Kicking off the latest session of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the secretary general urged governments to balance approaches countering drug trafficking with investments in prevention, stressing rehabilitation, upholding the human rights of people who use drugs, and expanding treatment programmes and health services. The statement comes against the backdrop of an extremely complex landscape.

The World Drug Report 2023 shows that over the past decade the number of people who use drugs and those suffering from drug use disorders increased by 23 per cent and 45pc respectively. It is becoming clear that the extensive use of punitive enforcement in deterring drug use has just not worked. In fact, drug policies globally have fuelled overcrowding, arbitrary executions, extrajudicial killings, and human rights violations against the poorest and most vulnerable.

At the moment, 20pc of the global prison population have been sentenced for drug-related offences. Thirty-four countries retain the death penalty for drug offences – accounting for almost half of all executions. Punitive approaches addressing drug use deliver unequal outcomes for marginalised populations, women and youth. Over 35pc of women in prison globally have been convicted of drug-related offences, compared with 19pc of men.

Despite challenges, countries are moving towards a new way of working – one that puts people’s needs, health and human rights at the centre of drug-control policies. Pivoting the focus of drug control from punishment to mainstreaming evidence-based treatments addressing the needs of drug users has shown improved outcomes for drug use, health and well-being and reductions in future harm for individuals and society as a whole. Countries like Mexico are developing therapeutic justice programmes to strengthen alternatives to incarceration and promote responsible drug use. Ghana’s recent drug policy framework monitors better health outcomes, including harm reduction.

The conversation is making its way across justice systems in Asia – where countries with the harshest drug policies can be found. In 2023, Malaysian lawmakers voted to remove the mandatory death penalty for drug trafficking. In India, a National Fund for Control of Drug Abuse has been established to support initiatives related to drug abuse prevention, treatment and rehabilitation.

Pakistan has also joined the movement by abolishing the death penalty for drug offences with the Control of Narcotic Substances (Amendment) Act, 2023. Notable efforts are being made in the country to shift towards evidence-based treatments, with Islamabad introducing the ‘Minimum

Service Delivery Standards for Psychiatric & Addiction Treatment/ Rehabilitation Facilities' in 2021.

The Anti-Narcotics Force is running four model rehabilitation centres and reported almost 22,000 people who had been voluntarily treated in these centres from 2005-2021. Much more needs to be done. There still remains an urgent need to counter over-incarceration for drug offences and improve access to health/ treatment for prisoners jailed for drug use, through the implementation of human rights-based sentencing guidelines and improved standards of healthcare in prisons.

Ministers, senior judges, policy experts, prosecutors, health professionals and human rights activists will convene in Islamabad from April 23-25 to drive the momentum in transforming drug policies pushing coercion and control to those based on health and human rights. Justice Project Pakistan is holding a conference titled 'Reimagining Justice: Public Health and Human Rights Centred Drug Policy' to take stock of regional and national best practices on a wide range of topics including sentencing for drug offences, over-incarceration for drug offences, and access to healthcare for persons who use drugs. The event, which will be held in person and online, aims to initiate a public dialogue on how the global drug problem can be solved by focusing on the health needs of people rather than coercion that has neither protected the welfare of people nor deterred drug crime.

More and more countries across the globe are adopting policies and practices that treat drug usage as a public health and human rights issue, and are applying evidence-based, gender-sensitive and harm reduction approaches. The data is clear – this is what works. If we are to finally solve the global drug problem, the momentum must keep building in the right direction. The time is now.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 20, 2024

Karachi terror

IS urban terrorism returning to Karachi? Yesterday's deplorable suicide bombing attack on a van carrying five Japanese nationals in the city's Landhi area comes two years after three Chinese academics were killed by a Baloch suicide bomber at the Karachi University. The Japanese autoworkers survived the attack, but one security guard died of his injuries. They were on their way to the Export Processing Zone. According to the police, the suicide bomber was killed in the attack and his accomplice was shot dead. Law enforcers also say that the collaborator fired 15 rounds and was equipped with grenades. While the Sindh chief minister has sought a report from the IGP, the slain associate is believed to have had links with a Baloch separatist outfit, underscoring the need for foreign nationals working on development and other projects in the country to be provided with an extra layer of security.

The violent incident cannot be taken lightly as it brings into question the vigilance and performance of the Counter-Terrorism Department and the intelligence machinery. Karachi was the venue of terror campaigns, political, sectarian and ethnic carnage for over two decades. Presently, brutal street crime afflicts it, costing too many lives daily. Therefore, law enforcement must evaluate its competence, especially when it is aware of sleeper cells in the metropolis, to keep the commercial nerve-centre from becoming an inferno again. Attempts to destabilise the city must be thwarted with precision. Although the reasons for this attack are unknown, security forces are duty-bound to intensify intelligence-gathering procedures, while the state must upgrade CT policies. Urban centres are seats of progress and power, thus hostile elements exploit flaccid security networks to target them. Moreover, the presence of paramilitary forces in Karachi should have neutralised militant groups. At a time when the economy is flagging and geopolitical temperatures are on the rise, Pakistan's growth depends on a safe environment for foreigners and investment.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 20, 2024

Two Customs men slain in another attack in Dera Ismail Khan

DERA ISMAIL KHAN: At least three people, including two Customs officials, were slain in an attack near Bannu Road, according to police. This was the second attack on Customs officials in Dera Ismail Khan in five days. A police spokesman said the Customs officials were travelling in a vehicle when armed assailants opened fire near Yarik Toll Plaza.

Two Customs officials, including inspector Hus-nain and constable Ziad Khan, lost their lives in the attack. A civilian, whose identity was yet to be ascertained, was also killed. According to APP, two Customs officials were also injured in the attack.

The bodies and injured officials were shifted to the D.I. Khan District Headquarters Hospital.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Governor Ghulam Ali, Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb and Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi strongly condemned the attack and expressed sympathy to the victims' families, APP reported. Mr Naqvi paid tribute to officials "who sacrificed their lives to prevent smuggling" and vowed strict action against smugglers. On Wednesday, five Customs officers were gunned down in an ambush during an intelligence-based operation within the remits of Daraban police station.

A civilian and a minor girl were also killed in the attack. The slain officers belonged to the Customs' Directorate of Intelligence and Investigation (Peshawar) and were conducting an IBO when they were ambushed by unknown assailants, an official statement issued by Customs said.

FC official martyred

In a separate attack on Sunday, a Frontier Corps (FC) personnel was martyred after being fired upon by unknown assailants in D.I. Khan's Kulachi tehsil. The martyred soldier was on leave from duty when he was gunned down. A police official said the FC personnel, identified as Mohammad Zubair, was sitting at his brother's mobile shop when the attackers opened fire.

He was martyred on the spot.

KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur condemned the attack and expressed his sympathy and condolences to the martyr's family. "We share the grief of the bereaved family," CM Gandapur said in a statement.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 22, 2024

11 terrorists killed in operations in North Waziristan, Dera Ismail Khan

Eleven terrorists were killed by security forces in two separate operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Dera Ismail Khan and North Waziristan districts, the military's media wing said.

A press release from the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that the operations took place last night. It said that an intelligence-based operation was conducted in Dera Ismail Khan district on the reported presence of terrorists.

"During conduct of the operation, after an intense fire exchange, ten terrorists were successfully neutralised and sent to hell," it said.

"In another encounter in North Waziristan district, own troops effectively engaged the terrorists' location as a result of which one more terrorist was sent to hell," the ISPR said.

It added that the militants were "actively involved in numerous terrorist activities" in the area against security forces as well as civilians. The ISPR further said that arms and ammunition were also recovered from their possession.

"Locals of the area appreciated the operations by the security forces, who remain determined to eliminate the menace of terrorism from the country," the ISPR said.

Last week, seven terrorists were killed while trying to infiltrate the Afghan-Pakistan border in North Waziristan district.

Earlier this month, two militants were gunned down by security forces in an exchange of fire in North Waziristan 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, APRIL 22, 2024

No country for children: The not-so-hidden horrors of child sexual abuse in Pakistan

BY AFIYA S. ZIA



Recent reports of sexual molestation of children by clerics and incriminating videos of corporal punishment of madrassa students are neither new discoveries, nor particular to Pakistan.

Globally, totalitarian institutions – seminaries, the Vatican, and even lay establishments like boarding schools, military barracks, orphanages, and shelters – have long records of systemic abuse. However, the power of clerical lobbies in Pakistan often secures impunity for religious institutions and only the high risks taken by whistleblowers, fearless activists, and survivors result in any kind of justice.

Unfortunately, over the past 20 years, the more temporal approaches to social development in Pakistan have been displaced by a generation convinced that sacralising development is appropriate for Muslim sensibilities. This has complicated pre-existing challenges in Pakistan's colonial and Islamic hybrid legal regime, deepened the shame and stigma associated with concepts of gender and sex, and privileged clerical authority over human rights advocacy.

Vocational sex abuse

According to data gathered by Sahil, an NGO working on cases of child sexual abuse, the overwhelming majority of abusers are acquaintances or neighbours in communities or family members. At the same time, the data also shows that institutionally, the highest number of

complaints emerge against religious teachers or clerics – more so than police, school-teachers, or nuclear family members.

In 2020, the Associated Press documented several cases of sexual abuse in madrassas, including the case of 8-year-old Yaous in Mansehra, where despite the arrest of the offender, Qari Shamsuddin, fellow clerics and worshippers at the mosque disputed the charges, terming him innocent and a ‘victim of anti-Islamic elements in the country’. The cleric was later sentenced to 16.5 years imprisonment.

Primary data remains limited and organisations rely on media reports and police complaints but the trend over the past 20 years shows the gender divide of abused girls in madrassas is slightly higher than that of boys (‘Cruel Numbers’). The recent case of Qari Abubakar Muaviyah’s alleged rape of a 12-year-old boy in Shahdara initially looked like a lost cause due to the usual clerical pressure for the survivor to resile.

Under the amended anti-rape law, the police and prosecutors are duty bound to continue investigation and judicial hearing, even if the survivor resiles, yet they prefer compromises. The difficulty of obtaining DNA forensics is another escape route in many cases. In the end, it was only social media pressure over the Muaviyah case that resulted in a political and legal response against powerful religious lobbies.

Over the years, there have also been several reports of gang rapes in such seminaries. In very rare cases do children fight their rapists off and where parents are resilient in their pursuit for justice.

The madrassa reform debacle

Historically, Pakistani madrassas have been subject to cycles of reorganisation and reform but only over curricula or funding and not institutional accountability.

In 2003, at the peak of the ‘war on terror’, a new form of war anthropology and research methods emerged, relying on fixers, handlers, translators, NGO research and No Objection Certificates awarded by the military authorities at their discretion. This new paradigm produced a body of newly minted ‘experts’ on Islam, terrorism, jihad, security and conflict studies and now, Islam and development, as funded by British and American governments under the pretext of Muslim exceptionalism (especially, Muslim women and the poor).

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) implemented a five-year, \$100 million bilateral agreement in 2002. Another multi-million pound religions and research project was spearheaded by DFID in 2008, paving the way for faith-based approaches to social change in Pakistan. With the help of overseas Pakistani consultants, they found that religion can be valuable in terms of providing organisational resources for social movements, with religious leaders and Muslim NGOs as ‘partners’.

Policy briefs from such projects stressed on the need to review and include religion into the mainstream of development research and policy itself, including support to madrassas and to encourage women’s religious leadership as alternatives to Western feminism.

At the time, Gen Musharraf's US-compliant government was facing domestic resistance for registering madrassas as suspected support bases and havens for terrorists. The top-down consultant policy briefs insisted on the kind of reform that was acceptable to the undefined "Ulema" and ignored the experiences of civil society on the subject by dismissing any critique of faith-based development by feminists as 'western and liberal-secular orientalism'.

The experts producing such research rode the crest of Gen Musharraf's duplicitous project of enlightened moderation and recommended the inclusion of madrassas and clerical leaders into the social development sector. Even those claiming radical credentials, and who were critical of the binaries of western secular departure from religious-based education, invested hope in the role of madrassas as some decolonising, non-Western social safety nets for children from impoverished backgrounds and in women's empowerment through mosque and madrasa piety.

These researchers and studies completely ignored – as some orientalist presumption – the history of corporal punishment and child sexual abuse at mosques and madrassas that human rights activists had been documenting for at least a decade. This was a revealing and damaging missed opportunity.

This 'partnership' between donors and clerics has empowered the latter as community gatekeepers (especially, in projects related to education, vaccination, child protection committees and labour). Recent cases have shown, however, that some of these clerics, who are now power brokers, may pressurise victims to resile charges of sex abuse in communities and madrassas, and who facilitate compromise and settling cases outside of courts, especially when it involves fellow clerics.

Law as protection, not a right

Research studies, academic theses and donor reports continue to recommend that Pakistan's government should make genuine efforts to understand how the madrasa leadership perceives reform and modernisation, and for involvement in social development projects without any caution for regulation of widespread allegations of physical or sexual abuses.

Every other sector of reform is subjected to correction as a constitutional and moral imperative (especially, the 'corrupt' bureaucracy and judiciary) but the one sector where appeasement by government and donors remains consistent is religion and its institutional influence. This extends and sustains moral and legal impunity to the priestly classes and prevents rights-based progress.

In the first instance, legal reform has managed to chip at some religious exemption by way of releasing rape and honour crimes from the Qisas and Diyat loophole. It took 30 years of consistent advocacy from women's rights activists and not the route of some decolonial thesis, nor due to reinterpretive exegesis. The amendments to many discriminatory laws have been rationalised by liberal appeal and universalising influences within the Constitution and while some opportunist clerics and politicians have been 'encouraged' to curb their opposition, this does not count as 'success' of ecclesiastical partnerships.

Secondly, many gender and religious biases are underwritten in family laws which prevent consensus or consistency on matters of sexual maturity and underage marriage. Over 18 per cent of girls and 4 pc of boys in Pakistan are married before the age of 18 and prevention is complicated by our dual legal regime and by societal trends of forced conversions of girls from religious minorities. If marriage remains an unequal legal arrangement for all women, and an economic safety net for the poor and a social status for the rich, girls will remain devalued for just their labour and reproductive worth and their virginites and sexual purity will serve as premiums.

Third, overwhelmingly, cases of any but especially child sexual abuse continue to be subject to attrition where survivors or victims' families resile under counsel and social pressure from community, police or clerical leaders. As human rights lawyers point out, as long as the judicial process privileges ocular evidence over corroborative forms and courts are unwilling to try cases despite resiling, sex crimes will not be subject to justice.

Mythos over logos

Beyond legal recourse, social protection for Pakistani children remains precarious due to misguided beliefs and flawed remedies.

The first myth that family, marriage, and community are safe havens encourage private settlements in sex abuse cases and perpetuate lifelong generational trauma. The second damaging myth is that biology is the driver of sexual violence instead of unequal power relations, especially between genders.

Feminists have countered both these fallacies. They refute the notion that sex abuse is a private matter by insisting that the personal is political and risk their lives to speak out on the commonality of violence in families and marriages. The Aurat March movement has expanded this cause with many members narrating their own experiences of sexual offences and providing ventilation for other survivors. Stigmatising sex education, or underplaying abuse on the pretext of immorality or false respectability, disarms the potential victim from self-defence – silence and shame is the paedophile's best alibi.

Glorifying the virtues of domesticated pious women and obedient children justifies discipline and decision-making as the male guardian's natural right. Feminists contend that it is not biology but elite capture of social, economic, political resources that buys impunity for powerful abusive men. They also point out that while there is significant challenge in addressing attitudes within clerical, judicial, and political circles where some may justify male privilege, dismiss allegations of sex crimes, or blame victims, such figures often remain in positions of leadership and trust.

Age of innocence; beyond reliance and alliances

Despite these conceits of legal, social and sexual inequalities, the self-defeating solutions continue to fixate on laws, liberation theology, and male allies – but each needs reconsideration.

Pakistan has no standard legal definition of a child – ages for voting, marriage, sex crime, factory work, succession age, or as a juvenile liable to criminal proceedings – vary considerably across the country and provinces. Addressing sex crimes either involves deferring responsibility to

communities and families, which may perpetuate abuse, or relying on technological solutions as a last resort.

There are at least 17 officially listed helplines for children-related complaints, yet members of Sahil say that hardly any child uses the helplines to complain (it is mostly parents or other adults who use the referral system). The high profile and politicised Zainab Alert App for missing children offers lopsided results nationwide and reports more abduction of boys than girls in every province, offering no analysis.

Most laws and policies on women's and children's rights are missing data or evaluation, yet random remedies continue to sink the country's global ranking. The girl-child has been the poster figure for the UN and donor organisations that have sponsored efforts to change the fate of generations of stunted, anaemic, illiterate Pakistani girls from growing into disenfranchised, disinherited, dependent and vulnerable adult women.

But the hubris that has insisted on religious inclusivity in donor programming over the past 20 years, has escalated faith-based approaches to girls' and women's development and which essentially bribe male religious leaders to approve projects that deliver basic rights. This approach has reinforced the role of clerics as gatekeepers in community programmes – officials note a variety of specialised roles among clerics, including those focusing on polio, family planning, and gender issues. Those who defended piety politics and appealed for faith appropriate alternatives to 'Western' rights have subdued radical resistance into reformatory donor projects and culture festivals. This has also trapped the Aurat March movement, since pietist women oppose the demands for sexual equality in a not-so-docile manner.

Improving conviction rates for sex offences is important but castration or cajoling male allies to detox their masculinities is not going to end sex abuse. The only proven difference is when women and children refuse to remain silent; instead, they subvert and challenge all disparities, insist on equal educational, inheritance, marital, and professional rights, rather than constantly bargain with patriarchy or plead with its institutional representatives.

Rather than pouring resources into Sisyphean programmes for community behavioural change, perhaps, it is time to empower the child directly. This could involve implementing rights-based approaches and providing information and leadership to diminish the influence of community leaders, guardians, and traditional intermediaries. Such measures would help restore a sense of balance while ensuring the safety and self-reliance of children.

As long as academics sanitise religious institutions and activists promote faith-based laws and rights as decolonial tools; as long as newspapers refuse to carry 'sensitive' discussions on religion or sex, and feminists wait politely on the good will of male allies to introspect and lose their privileges; as long as governments continue to appease the political clerical classes while donors continue their paradoxical faith based social development, the country will fail to secure the godliness that is, a safe childhood.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 24, 2024

3 terrorists killed in intelligence-based operation in Khyber district

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

In a statement, the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) said an IBO was carried out in the area on the night of April 24/25 based on the "reported presence of terrorists".

"During the conduct of operation, intense fire exchange took place between own troops and terrorists, as a result of which three terrorists were sent to hell, including terrorist ringleader Sohail Azmato and terrorist ringleader Haji Gul Zarkavi. Terrorists' hideout was also busted during the operation," the ISPR said.

It added that arms and ammunition were recovered from the slain militants who had remained "actively involved in numerous terrorist activities in the area".

The ISPR said locals "appreciated" the operation, adding that a sanitisation operation was under way to "eliminate any other terrorist found in the area as security forces are determined to wipe out the menace of terrorism from the country".

Eleven alleged terrorists were killed in two IBOs in Dera Ismail Khan and North Waziris-tan on Monday and Tuesday.

Earlier this month, two militants were gunned down by security forces in an exchange of fire in North Waziristan 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, APRIL 25, 2024

4 terrorists killed in intelligence-based operation in Tank

Four terrorists were killed by security forces in an intelligence-based operation (IBO) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Tank district, the media's military wing said.

A press release issued by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that the operation took place last night on the reported presence of terrorists in the area.

"Own troops effectively engaged the terrorists' location as a result of which four terrorists were sent to hell," the ISPR said. "These terrorists remained actively involved in numerous terrorist activities in the area," it added.

It said that weapons and ammunition were also recovered from the terrorists.

"Locals of the area appreciated the operation by the security forces, who remain determined to eliminate the menace of terrorism from the country," the statement said.

On Sunday, two alleged militants were killed in an exchange of fire with security forces in Dera Ismail Khan district. An intense gun battle took place between security forces and militants which left two militants – Nawaz alias Gandapuri and Mohsin Nawaz – dead, the ISPR said.

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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, APRIL 29, 2024

Stirring monster

BY MOHAMMAD ALI BABAKHEL

LAST month's attack on a Moscow concert hall garnered global media attention, highlighting the rapidly expanding capabilities of the militant Islamic State. The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan has provided opportunities for militant groups to revisit their policies and targets, resulting in a surge in terrorism. In the South Asia region, in addition to ideological affiliates of Al Qaeda, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) now poses a significant threat.

Since its formation in 2015, ISKP has extended its influence in South Asia and is experiencing a resurgence enabled by the post-US withdrawal situation. Although the group was forced in 2019 to surrender control of territory it once held in northern and eastern Afghanistan, it has shifted its focus to urban warfare and has since executed numerous lethal attacks. It is also striving to broaden its geographic scope beyond Afghanistan by attracting talent from existing extremist networks.

A central body, the General Directorate of Provinces, is entrusted by the IS to coordinate regional affiliates. The GDP has a dedicated bureau for South Asia called the Maktab al-Saddiq. Reportedly, ISKP maintains communication with its local leadership, but local formations also exercise operational autonomy. ISKP seems flexible in its ambitions, operations, and ties with other militant groups. This is why, after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and despite the arrests and killings of its members, ISKP remains a significant threat.

The ISKP's strategy can be divided into two phases: from 2015 to late 2019, its strategy was to gain territory and consolidate control. However, by 2019, ISKP was facing intense pressure and consequently lost territorial control, which proved to be a significant setback. In the second phase, from 2020 onwards, it began focusing on urban warfare. This change of strategy came with the objective of eroding the legitimacy of the Afghan Taliban among the locals. The shift was followed by attacks on the Nangarhar prison, a funeral procession in Nangarhar, and attacks on local Shias and students at Kabul University.

In the 2020 attack on Nangarhar Jail, carried out by 11 suicide bombers, 1,000 prisoners were released, including 280 ISKP members. Subsequently, the number of ISKP attacks in Afghanistan increased from 83 in 2020 to 334 in 2021. Two weeks after the exit of US troops from Afghanistan, the attack on Kabul airport resulted in 170 deaths.

Initially, ISKP recruitment was done primarily from areas around the Pak-Afghan border, from where it attracted former TTP fighters with Salafi linkages and sectarian influences. The ISKP's territorial losses in Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover have since changed recruitment

patterns, and the group has consequently tried to attract militants on the pretext that the Taliban betrayed the jihadi cause and hence it is the only viable option to be associated with.

The ISKP also intends to expand in the periphery, including India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. However, it has struggled with ground operations. The presence of Myanmar's disenfranchised Rohingya population in Bangladesh offers the potential for the recruitment of sympathisers. In Bangladesh, the one million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar (52 per cent of whom are children) have already been targeted by the ISKP; however, the group withdrew when faced with the wrath of counterterrorism (CT) operations.

Denying space to violent non-state actors in poor or disaster-affected communities is critical. States should invest more funds in eradicating illiteracy and developing vocational skills in order to deter employment by militant groups within poor communities, and strengthen relief operations and improve the well-being of disaster victims in order to discourage employment within disaster-affected communities.

Since the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the ISKP has not faced the same pressure from CT operations, but it has still not seemed very successful in expanding its influence in South Asia. The primary reason for its inability is its confinement to Afghanistan, the availability of a smaller number of foreign fighters to join ISKP, and its lack of success in establishing an operational hierarchy outside Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, the ISKP is trying to take advantage of the withdrawal of US troops, weak governance, isolated administration, absence of an organised CT apparatus, use of technology, latest propaganda techniques, and the vacuum created due to a fractured Al Qaeda. The question remains: are the great powers intent on stopping it in its tracks, or will the threat be allowed to return?

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 29, 2024

Militant attacks claim 70 lives in April, 2024

ISLAMABAD: Following a brief lull in March, militant attacks in the country surged once again in April, with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, particularly its southern districts, bearing the brunt.

These findings were released by an Islamabad-based think-tank, Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), in its monthly security assessment report.

According to statistics, the country experienced at least 77 verifiable militant attacks during April, resulting in 70 fatalities, including 35 civilians and 31 members of security forces. Four militants were killed.

The number of injured individuals was 67 – 32 civilians and 35 security personnel.

In comparison, March saw 56 militant attacks, resulting in 77 fatalities and 67 injuries. This indicates a 38 per cent increase in the number of militant attacks, although there was a nine per cent decline in deaths, with no change in the number of injuries.

The security report also underscored the efforts of the country's security forces in thwarting numerous potential attacks during the month. At least 55 suspected militants were killed and 12 others arrested, including individuals involved in the Basham suicide attack, marking a 55 per cent increase in militant deaths compared to March.

The report further said that 73pc of the total number of militant attacks reported in April took place in KP, including its tribal districts. Fifty-six attacks were reported in the province during the previous month. The attacks killed 43 people – 26 members of security forces and 17 civilians.

The number of the injured stood at 32 – 19 members of security forces and 13 civilians.

Within KP, mainland districts saw more attacks and fatalities than tribal districts (formerly Fata). Mainland KP witnessed 31 attacks, resulting in 25 fatalities and 10 injuries. The southern districts of D.I. Khan, Lakki Marwat, Bannu, and Tank were the most affected, with D.I. Khan and Lakki Marwat facing seven militant attacks each, Bannu facing six, and Tank experiencing two attacks. Together, these districts accounted for 71pc of the attacks in mainland KP.

Additionally, Peshawar faced four attacks, while Swat, Swabi, Charsadda, Shangla, and Battagram experienced one attack each.

In the tribal districts of KP (formerly Fata), PICSS recorded at least 25 attacks, resulting in 18 fatalities and 22 injuries. North Waziristan, Bajaur, and South Waziristan were the most affected districts, with nine, five, and four attacks reported, respectively.

According to the report, Balochistan faced 16 attacks, resulting in 21 fatalities, including 17 civilians and four security personnel, with 31 individuals injured. Most of these attacks took place in the Baloch belt of the province, particularly in the south and southwest. Specifically, three attacks were reported in Khuzdar, two in Kech, Kohlu, and Quetta each, and one each in Chaman, Dera Bugti, Duki, Kalat, Kharan, Mastung, and Nushki.

Punjab also witnessed a surge in militant activities, with four attacks reported in April compared to one in March, resulting in three fatalities. One attack was reported in Sindh, resulting in three fatalities.

In the first four months of the year, the country experienced 323 militant attacks, resulting in 324 fatalities and 387 injuries.

SOURCE: DAWN, MAY 2, 2024