

AS DEATH TOLL REACHES EIGHT POLIO WORKERS, TALIBAN DENY RESPONSIBILITY FOR ATTACKS THEY FOMENTED

At least two more polio workers have been killed today in Pakistan, raising the death toll to eight since the latest three day immunization drive started this week. Reuters brings details from today's attacks

Wednesday saw four separate attacks, all in the north. In the district of Charsadda, men on motorbikes shot dead a woman and her driver, police and health officials said.

Hours earlier, gunmen wounded a male health worker in the nearby provincial capital of Peshawar. He was in critical condition, said a doctor at the Lady Reading Hospital where he is being treated.

Four other women health workers were shot at but not hit in nearby Nowshera, said Jan Baz Afridi, deputy head of the Expanded Programme on Immunisation. Two women health workers were shot at in Dwasaro village in Charsadda, police said.

The attacks on Tuesday in Karachi happened in very rapid succession, as reported by the Express Tribune:

Madiha, 19, and Fahmida, 44, were the first two to be slain in the Gulshan-e-Buner area of Landhi. Within 15 minutes, Naseema Akhtar, was shot dead in Orangi

Town, while her colleague, Israr, was critically injured in the attack.

Thirty minutes later, Kaneez Jan, was shot dead in Ittehad Town, while her coworker, Rashid, was injured in the attack.

As was pointed out in July when a doctor in Karachi was shot during the vaccination drive at that time, violence directed at polio workers was not expected there. Instead, it was expected in the tribal areas where both the general rumors of the vaccination program being run by spies and the vaccination plan being a plot to sterilize Muslims are rampant. In addition, there was the more specific admonition by Taliban leader Hafiz Gul Bahadur that vaccinations in the tribal areas would not be allowed until US drone attacks stopped.

Remarkably, even though the Taliban in Pakistan have spoken out against the immunization drives in the past, they appear to be denying responsibility for the current attacks. From the Reuters article linked above:

The Taliban have repeatedly threatened health workers involved in the campaign. Some said they received calls telling them to stop working with “infidels” just before the attacks.

But a spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban, Ihsanullah Ihsan, told Reuters his group was not involved in the violence.

Despite that denial, we learn from the New York Times that Taliban figures were blamed for today’s attacks:

A spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban denied responsibility for the attacks, although the insurgents have a history of threatening polio eradication programs, claiming they are a cover for

American espionage activities.

But the police in Peshawar said that Taliban fighters based in Mohmand tribal agency, north of Peshawar, were involved in at least two of the attacks in the Peshawar area.

As I pointed out in my post yesterday, I blame Leon Panetta's confirmation that Dr. Shakil Afridi helped the CIA with his vaccination ruse for significantly escalating the verbal and now physical attacks against workers distributing polio vaccine. In a Twitter conversation with @ArifCRafiq yesterday evening, we discussed the relative timing of the disclosure of Afridi's involvement, Panetta's confirmation of the CIA link and the attacks on polio workers. Rafiq suggested that this Guardian article published July 11, 2011 was the first mention of Afridi. The final sentence of the article stands out as the most important for Panetta's subsequent actions:

The CIA refused to comment on the vaccination plot.

As commenter FrankProbst pointed out in a comment on yesterday's post, approving the fake vaccination plot was a big mistake by the CIA, but confirming it compounded that mistake. Panetta's confirmation of Afridi's role was in January of this year, as Marcy posted. In my opinion, Panetta's confirmation kept the issue of Afridi prominent in the news and provided a much stronger case for those who wanted to stoke the previously existing rumors that vaccination plans are run by spies.

As for Afridi himself, I still wonder if he has quietly been moved out of Pakistan. I asked one of his most vocal supporters, Dana Rohrabacher, on Twitter if he had more information on Afridi's status that could be shared. He replied that he intends to "launch a save Dr. Afridi campaign" early in January. In the meantime, I'm

still waiting for evidence that he remains in the Peshawar Central Jail.

In the midst of these events, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that polio eradication is very nearly within reach. Besides Pakistan, polio is reported to be endemic in Afghanistan and Nigeria. The Reuters article above points out that as recently as 1994, there were 20,000 cases in Pakistan. From CNN, we see that there were 173 cases reported in Pakistan last year and only 53 this year. Considering that hundreds of thousands of health workers are involved in the polio vaccination campaign aimed at protecting millions of Pakistani children, the current halt in the program could have devastating consequences for many of those children and for the drive to eradicate polio from the earth.