

EXPRESS TRIBUNE OFFICE IN KARACHI ATTACKED; SECOND TIME IN FOUR MONTHS

After a first attack by gunmen on August 16, the office of the Express Tribune in Karachi was attacked yesterday by men with guns and small improvised explosives made from tennis balls. In response, journalists in the Karachi area are calling for a rapid response from police and have threatened massive demonstrations if the culprits are not caught within 72 hours.

Police responses to both the August attack and yesterday's appeared to be very slow. From the August story:

The police reached the site 40 minutes after the incident even though both the Defence and Baloch Colony police stations were at a stone's throw from the media office.

In response to that attack, the same story noted that a "permanent" police presence was being put into place at the office:

A police mobile has been deputed outside the Express Media office permanently to avoid any untoward incident.

Except that the presence was not permanent. From the story on yesterday's attack:

The attack follows an earlier attempt by terrorists against the Express Media Group on August 16, when unknown gunmen opened fire at the building. Following the first attack, a police van was stationed at the Express Media Group's building to provide security. However, the police van had suddenly disappeared around two weeks back without

intimation.

With the police van gone, and even though police stations are nearby, the response was once again slow:

Following the attack, which lasted for about 15 minutes, a contingent of police reached the scene of the crime almost 10 minutes after the attackers had fled.

Private security for the Express Tribune managed to turn back the attackers:

According to eyewitness accounts, the attackers hurled a tennis-ball bomb towards the main entrance of the building from an overhead bridge running perpendicular to the Express Media Group building. The first bomb attack was followed by another within 30 seconds, and was accompanied by a hail of intermittent gunfire, both between and after the two attacks.

Following retaliatory fire by security guards stationed at the entrance, the assailants fled the scene of the attack towards Korangi Road.

The response by journalists appears strong and united:

In response to yesterday's attack on the offices of the Express Media Group in Karachi, journalists boycotted the Punjab Assembly, *Express News* reported on Tuesday.

Giving the government an ultimatum, they demanded that those responsible for the attack should be arrested within the next 72 hours. They added that if they were not caught in the given period of time, journalists would hold country-wide rallies.

/snip/

Alliance for Access is a nationwide coalition of civil society organizations, corporations, media houses, telecommunication companies, academics, and student groups to promote open access in Pakistan,

“We are appalled and disappointed by the lack of security provided to the Express group office in Karachi, despite being under constant threat,” a press release by the coalition stated.

According to the Committee for Protection of Journalists, over 24 journalists were targeted & killed for their work in Pakistan. Pakistan is on the 8th spot in the CPJ’s 2013 Impunity Index, which spotlights countries where journalists are murdered regularly and killers go free.

Back in March, a somewhat similar attack using tennis ball bombs and guns killed the principal of a school and injured several students. Suspects were arrested in that attack and described as belonging to outlawed groups but falsely claiming to be with the TTP in order to extort protection money. There is some thought that the newest attack might really have been carried out by the TTP. From the Express Tribune story on yesterday’s attack:

Senior police officials did not rule out the possibility of the outlawed Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan’s (TTP) hand in the attack. “In Karachi, the tennis ball bombs are invented by Taliban. Our investigation will focus on the Taliban’s possible involvement. We are hopeful that we will solve this attack and arrest the culprits soon,” said CID SP Chaudhry Aslam Khan.

There is a relationship between the Express

Tribune and the New York Times. From the Times article describing the attack:

The Express Media Group publishes an Urdu-language newspaper and an English daily, The Express Tribune, which is a partner publication of The International New York Times. The group also owns the Urdu television network Express News.

That article also recounted several recent threats against the Express Tribune and Pakistan's media in general:

Though the Pakistani Taliban did not claim responsibility for the attack, some officials believe that recent threats suggested that they were probably behind the shooting.

Most recently, the Taliban criticized the news media for praising the Indian cricket star Sachin Tendulkar, who retired in November.

One employee of Express Media Group speculated that Monday's attack might have been a reaction to a recent news article in The Express Tribune that said Taliban militants had been hiding in the Defense Housing Authority Phase II neighborhood, an upscale district of Karachi.

The newspaper's office in the northwestern city of Peshawar had received threats after the killing of the Pakistani Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud by an American drone strike on Nov. 1, the employee said.

It will be very interesting to see if the government can arrest suspects before the deadline is reached, triggering large demonstrations.