

RAPID DEVELOPMENTS IN PAKISTAN: TTP CEASEFIRE, HALT TO AIR STRIKES, SUICIDE BOMBS IN ISLAMABAD

In recent posts, I've been wondering just how Pakistan's new security policy will be implemented. Late last week, it appeared as though Pakistan was determined to carry out a sustained military intervention in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The big question to me was whether this action would be taken against only the TTP or if Pakistan would also be attacking groups such as the Haqqani network, which the US accuses Pakistan of supporting while they carry out attacks against US troops in Afghanistan. If Pakistan were to attack the Haqqani network, I predicted that the US will provide a major increase in counterterrorism funding to Pakistan.

There have been multiple major developments since my post on Friday, with the Taliban suddenly announcing a ceasefire and Pakistan's government responding favorably by stating that air raids in FATA will end during the ceasefire. These peaceful responses were shattered early today, though, with a major terror attack in Islamabad resulting in at least 11 dead and 25 wounded when a court area was attacked with guns and suicide bombs.

It appears that the committee of government representatives and Taliban representatives that had been appointed to get the peace talks re-started was responsible for getting the ceasefire put into place:

After the Taliban issued a call for ceasefire on Saturday, members of the government-nominated peace committee welcomed the call, terming it a major

breakthrough and an opportunity to hold direct talks between the two sides.

Major (ret'd) Mohammad Aamir, part of the government's peace committee negotiating with the Taliban, suggested that direct talks should now take place between the government and the Taliban as it is high "time for taking and making important decisions."

"I do not see any relevance now for the government committee as we have succeeded to convince the Taliban to come to the negotiation table and declare ceasefire," Aamir told The Express Tribune in an interview.

He disclosed that the "backdoor efforts" carried out by him and the Jamiat Ulema Islam -Samiul Haq Group leader Yousaf Shah resulted in the Taliban-declared ceasefire.

The government responded positively and quickly to the ceasefire announcement:

The Pakistani government on Sunday suspended its airstrike campaign against militants in the country's northwestern tribal regions in response to a Taliban cease-fire, raising the prospect that peace talks between the two sides will be revived.

The announcement of the suspension was made by the Pakistani interior minister, Nisar Ali Khan, on Sunday evening, and came hours after military gunships targeted militant positions in the northwestern Khyber tribal area in retaliation for an attack on health workers trying to vaccinate Pakistanis against polio. Officials said that notwithstanding the suspension, they would continue to respond to provocations by militants.

Tragically, the attack on the polio workers was especially deadly, with a death toll of 13. Khan also issued a warning along with his announcement of the halt to the air strikes:

“The government and the Armed Forces of Pakistan reserve the right to effectively respond to acts of violence,” the interior minister warned in a statement.

That warning is being put to test immediately, with today’s attack in Islamabad:

Eleven people were killed and 25 others injured in a suicide attack at a district court in Islamabad’s sector F-8, *Express News* reported on Monday.

/snip/

According to Islamabad SSP Dr Muhammad Rizwan, two young men entered the court premises. They hurled hand-grenades in the courtrooms and opened indiscriminate firing with automatic weapons.

/snip/

Police and intelligence agencies submitted an initial report to the interior ministry. According to the report, four armed men entered the court building and two suicide attacks took place. Firing broke out after the blasts and the other two attackers fled the scene.

The Taliban moved quickly to claim it was not involved in the attack:

Shahidullah Shahid, a spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban, denied any role in the attack. “We have nothing to do with the attack. We have announced a cease-fire, and we will follow it for one month. Media should restrain itself from blaming us,” Mr. Shahid said in a

telephone interview.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility by any other militant group.

There was also a call for no unjustified assignment of blame from Maulana Samiul Haq, who has been serving on the peace committee:

The government and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) should not blame each other for any attack and should look for “the third enemy,” stated Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Samiul Haq (JUI-S) chief Maulana Samiul Haq while talking to the media in Islamabad.

Haq is also heading the TTP intermediary committee.

The JUI-S chief expressed sorrow over the attack inside a Islamabad district court and said that he was happy about TTP condemning the assault.

Not to be overlooked in this rapid sequence of major events is a detail that appeared in the Washington Post’s coverage of the attack. From about midway through the article, when we get to background information on the attack, we have this (emphasis added):

On Sunday evening, about 12-hours before the court house was attacked, Pakistan’s government announced it had agreed to a one-month unconditional cease-fire with Taliban militants.

The cease-fire follows several weeks of airstrikes in which the Pakistani military targeted militants and foreign fighters in tribal areas near the border with Afghanistan as well in Kyhber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Pakistani officials and analysts predicted the airstrikes would be

quickly followed up by a major military ground assault aimed at dislodging militants affiliated with the Taliban, Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda. But just when it appeared that ground offensive may be imminent, the Pakistani Taliban announced Saturday it wanted a one-month cease-fire with government forces.

So at least the “Pakistani officials and analysts” that the Washington Post relies on have stated that the offensive was indeed to have included the Haqqani network among its targets, just as I was suspecting.

Meanwhile, Dawn had reported on Friday on a group of militants being arrested in Islamabad:

Police claimed to have arrested six suspects and seized a number of hand-grenades, explosives and weapons during a search operation here on Friday night.

The operation continued till late in the night as associates of the detained men were reportedly firing back on police.

According to police, the operation in Kural and Tarlai areas was launched on information that terrorists were planning to attack a sensitive installation and they had almost completed their preparation.

Certainly, the court complex attacked today would fit as a “sensitive installation”, so we are left to wonder if today’s attack was what these arrests were trying to prevent. Yesterday, Dawn followed up that article with information on the affiliations of those arrested:

Seven suspects arrested in a locality of the capital late on Friday night after an encounter are members of a splinter group of Harkatul Mujahideen and involved in targeted killings, extortion and acts of terrorism, police said here

on Saturday.

/snip/

An unspecified number of accomplices of the arrested people escaped and took away explosives and weapons after the shootout with the police.

/snip/

According to the police, the group called itself Intaqmi (revenge) and it replaced its predecessor, the Tanveer Gondal group, in Islamabad which was busted by police last year. The group comprised members of Harkatul Mujahideen and Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan.

Police said members of the group were involved in targeted killings of Shias in Rawalpindi and Nowshera.

Meanwhile, the arrested people were produced in the anti-terrorism court which remanded them to the police custody.

An article in Pakistan Today suggests that the court attack might have been aimed at freeing a suspect, so the question arises whether any of the suspects from Friday's arrests were appearing in court today, and if the attack was aimed at freeing them:

Officers at the scene told AFP the incident began when a defendant was brought before the court and his associates tried to break him free.

Another senior-ranking police official said the incident could be a terror attack but nothing could be said with certainty as yet.

The next few days will be pivotal as Pakistan sorts through these recent events.