

Bloodshed in Balochistan

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Contrary to the Balochistan government's claims of restoration of peace and rooting out terrorist activities in the province, acts of terrorism continued to be reported throughout 2016.

Although, in the wake of the National Action Plan (NAP), violence by separatist insurgents receded to some extent, attacks by banned sectarian and other militant extremist groups rose. These included a number of assaults exacting a high death toll, mainly suicide attacks targeting lawyers in Sandeman Provincial Hospital (Quetta) on August 8, trainee cadets in Police Training College (Quetta) on October 24 and pilgrims at Shah Noorani shrine (Khuzdar) on November 12. The three attacks killed at least 180 people, mainly lawyers and police personnel, and caused injuries to over 300.

The Balochistan government has claimed that all militants active in the province, whether separatists or militant extremists, are being patronized by Indian intelligence agency RAW and Afghanistan's intelligence agency NDS. The provincial home minister has shown in his press conferences recorded confession statements of around a dozen Afghan nationals arrested by law enforcement agencies. The recordings showed them confessing to being trained by Indian intelligence operatives and sent to Pakistan by NDS in order to carry out terrorist activities, such as targeted killings and bombings in various cities of Balochistan.

The provincial home minister has also claimed that Abu Sufian alias Amir Muaviya, the spokesperson for banned

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi sectarian group, has a sanctuary in the Afghan border town of Spin Boldak, from where he monitored terrorists activities in Pakistan with active support of Indian and Afghan intelligence agencies.

It has been two years since the federal government adopted the 20-point National Action Plan (NAP), with the primary objective to root out terrorism from the country. Even before the formulation of NAP, intelligence-based operations against militants were going on in Balochistan, but their pace picked up after the adoption of NAP in January 2015. Reduction in the scale of the separatist insurgency was apparent across Balochistan in 2016, but religious extremist militancy persisted. The military operation under NAP in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province seemed to have reduced the capabilities of the extremist militants there and at least some of them shifted their focus to Balochistan where the security measures had not been as stringent over the same period.

Suicide attacks by banned sectarian organizations targeting the Shia population declined. This might have been part of the militants' tactics, to either go into hiding and largely suspend their activities or relocating in the wake of action against them in their areas of operation, mainly the outskirts of Quetta and the neighbouring district of Mastung. However, militants from the militant sectarian outfits continued to target, albeit in small-scale attacks, members of the Shia community.

Separatist Baloch insurgents have been active in 24 out of the total 32 districts of

Balochistan. Their activities reduced by varying degrees in each restive district in 2016, but were not completely brought to an end. They continued to attack the security forces, civilians and government installations, etc., in some northeastern districts, such as Loralai, Musakhail, Harnai, and in eastern, central and western parts of Balochistan. The government claimed that the main insurgent commanders such as Dr. Allah Nazar of Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), Abdul Nabi Bungalzai of United Baloch Army (UBA) and Aslam Achoo of Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) were killed in intelligence-based operations. However, video messages of Allah Nazar and Bungalzai surfaced on the social media subsequently, while BLA also claimed that Achoo was alive.

Between January 1 and November 12, 2016, over 400 persons, including civilians and personnel of law enforcement agencies and paramilitary Frontier Corps, were killed in about 145 reported attacks.

Most of these casualties however resulted from attacks by the Taliban and sectarian groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Alami.

The Baloch separatist groups were able, however, to carry out low-level attacks, including killing of civilians after calling them agents of security agencies also some assaults on law enforcement agencies' personnel and government

installations. In the districts of central and eastern Balochistan, where the insurgents had once created serious law and order problems, they appeared to have been reduced to token presence by the end of 2016. In some districts of the coastal Makran division, separatist insurgent groups were still active to some extent, but their activists seemed to be constantly on the run amid heavy security forces' deployment.

The government has gone to great lengths to restore peace in the region in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and economic activities relating to the Gwadar port. In view of the strategic and economic significance of CPEC for Pakistan, the security agencies seem to have little tolerance for anyone creating hurdles in the implementation of the project. A significant number of regular army and Frontier Corps personnel have been deployed in Gwadar to safeguard the CPEC route as well as Gwadar town. A special wing of Pakistan Navy has been raised for the security of vessels in the territorial waters around the Makran coast.

The leadership of the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) insurgent group, which has been active in the western or central districts of Balochistan, has gone into hiding, either in the areas close to the Iranian border or moved across the border into Iran or Afghanistan. According to available data, BLF claimed responsibility for around 25 attacks in 2016.

A number of important militant commanders of Baloch Republican Army (BRA) insurgent group, whose leader Brahamdagh Bugti lives in self-exile in Switzerland, surrendered to the authorities in the eastern districts particularly in Bugti's home town Dera Bugti. BRA claimed to have carried out over 30 attacks and 'operations' in 2016.

Similarly, in the Kohlu Marri area, many tribesmen who had been loyal to separatist leader Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri and involved with the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) have shifted to different areas of Sindh, including Karachi. BLA is the oldest and the most effective of Baloch insurgent groups. It operates in Kohlu and across Balochistan and claimed to have conducted around 70 attacks in 2016. Late Nawab Khair Bakhsh, after being estranged from his elder son Harbiyar Marri, nominated his youngest son Zamaran alias Mehran Marri who formed another insurgent group, United Baloch Army (UBA). Harbiyar, who now heads BLA, and Mehran live in London in self-exile. UBA claimed responsibility for around a dozen attacks in Mastung, Kalat and Bolan districts in 2016. Its area of operation appeared to have shrunk to these districts.

Another insurgent group, Lashkar-e-Balochistan, led by Javed Mengal, the eldest son of elderly Baloch leader Sardar Attaullah Mengal, claimed responsibility for

around 20 attacks in central Balochistan during the year under review.

Under the government's general amnesty scheme, around 500 Baloch militants surrendered to the authorities during 2016, vowing to quit the insurgency and remain loyal to Pakistan.

Despite repeated wall chalking in favour of Daesh, as the so-called Islamic State militant organization is sometimes referred to in Balochistan, in the provincial capital Quetta, even in the vicinity of the offices of the provincial chief minister and the governor, the Balochistan government has been denying the presence of Daesh-related elements in any part of Balochistan. The claim of responsibility by Daesh in two gruesome suicide attacks during the year has perhaps persuaded the government to take the threat more seriously. Among banned religious and sectarian militant organizations, TTP, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Aalami and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar have been operating in the province for quite some time. The LeJ and the TTP are the oldest among them.

The TTP has also been operating in Balochistan's northern parts, bordering Afghanistan and FATA, and the security forces have launched operations against the outlawed group, both before and since the adoption of NAP. It has been involved in abducting government officials and NGO staff for ransom. The LeJ has replaced

Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, which was involved in sectarian violence in the province before being proscribed. LeJ activists seem to be using the names of Jaish-Ul-Islam, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Aalami and Jamaat-Ul-Ahrar as much for any operational reasons as to create the impression that several such organizations are operating in the province.

Suicide attack in Sandeman Provincial Hospital

On August 8, Jamaatul Ahrar militants gunned down Balochistan Bar Association President Bilal Kasi. When lawyers gathered in the hospital where Kasi's body was brought, a suicide bomber detonated his explosives among approximately 200 lawyers, including the top leadership of the legal fraternity in Balochistan. As many as 72 people, including 56 lawyers, were killed and another 112 received injuries. Many of the injured died due to excessive bleeding or for want of first aid inside the biggest hospital of the province. Doctors, paramedics and support staff were not available in the hospital until hours after the suicide bombing. Daesh and Jamaatul Ahrar claimed responsibility for the attack. Police claimed that the mastermind of the attack, Jahangir Badini, and four of his accomplices were killed in an encounter in Huramzai area of Pishin district on December 5.

Police investigation found that Rs. 0.7 million had been brought from Afghanistan

and handed over to Jahangir in border town of Chaman to carry out the attack. The suicide bomber was identified as Ahmad Ali Awan, 29. He belonged to a very poor family and had been working as a clerk for a lawyer and also as a rickshaw driver after office hours. One of his brothers had been killed in Afghanistan while fighting against government forces. His family lived in Killi Deeba in the heart of Quetta. Jahangir who lived in Awan's neighbourhood had apparently enlisted him as a suicide bomber. He brought new clothes and shoes for Awan for the attack. Jahangir and two of his accomplices, all of who were later reportedly killed in a clash with the police, gunned down Bilal Kasi and later took the suicide bomber to the hospital. Minutes before the bomber detonated his explosives, Jahangir and the other two men disappeared from the scene. This was the first incident of this magnitude in which the police tracked down the mastermind and accomplices, identifying all the main characters.

Attack on police training college

On the night of October 24, three heavily armed attackers scaled over a rundown wall of the Police Training College in Quetta. They went to the sleeping quarters of the unarmed trainee cadets and started shooting at them. Commandoes from the military, and Frontier Corps and police personnel were sent to rescue the cadets. In a four-hour gun battle, 61 persons including an army captain and a

commando were killed while 117 people sustained injuries. Two of the attackers blew up their explosives and the third was shot and killed by law enforcement personnel.

Learning from the August 8 hospital experience, the government made doctors, paramedics and all necessary medicines available to treat the injured. Police stated that all three attackers were Afghan nationals and were being given directions from Afghanistan. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Alami and Daesh claimed responsibility for the attack.

Attack on Shah Noorani shrine

Hardly three weeks after the PTC attack, a suicide bomber found a soft target in one of the most remote parts of Balochistan. The bombing occurred at a Sufi shrine in Wadh area of Khuzdar district. The pilgrims, mostly from Karachi, had gathered on the premises of the Shah Noorani shrine for the evening *Dhamal* (a trance-like dance) when the suicide bomber blew himself up in the middle of the crowd, killing 52 people and injuring another 102. Several people who were initially hurt succumbed to their injuries, many because no medical assistance or ambulance could be arranged for them for several hours. The injured received first aid at a hospital in Hub town and were later shifted to Karachi. Daesh and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Aalami both claimed responsibility for this attack also.

Targeted killing of women

For the first time in the history of Balochistan, four women were killed in a targeted attack by armed militants. In the October 4 attack on the outskirts of Quetta, four women, three of them from the Shia Hazara community and the fourth a Sunni, were travelling in the women-only compartment of a bus, when an armed man entered the compartment and opened fire, killing all four. Police say the assailant apparently believed that all four women were Shias. The attacker later escaped. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Aalami claimed responsibility for the attack and called the killing of Shia women revenge for killing of Sunni women and children in Syria by government forces.

Judicial commission report

After the August 8 mass killing of lawyers in Quetta, the Supreme Court of Pakistan constituted a judicial commission of inquiry led by its judge Qazi Faez Isa. In its findings, the commission faulted the government and its agencies for failing to take adequate security measures in and around the hospital and the Police Training College to prevent the attacks. The commission also pointed out examples of bad governance on account of nepotism, favouritism, deviation from rules and political interference, etc., in public hospitals and government departments.

The commission report severely criticized the provincial chief minister, the home minister and the government spokesman for making false claims about arresting the mastermind of the hospital attack, which it stated misled the public and undermined the investigation. It also made several recommendations to improve government departments' performance by following rules without exception or political interference in posting and transfer of government employees, particularly in the administration.