

interview - part

Isolating the Taliba



By Mustafa Qadri

Violence in Pakistan can only be tackled if the state listens to devastated communities and recognises the Taliban threat

It was really only a matter of time before we would see this. A day after a bomb ripped through central Lahore, three explosions rocked Peshawar - two at the famous storytellers' market, and another near the city's railway station, destroying significant amounts of property, lives and livelihoods. It is too early to know what motivated these latest attacks in Peshawar. Like so much of the North-West Frontier Province, however, Peshawar businesses, particularly book music shops and women's clothing stores, have been heavily hit, often after being told to shut for being unIslamic.

The motivation in Lahore appears to

be clearer. Yesterday's suicide gun and bomb attack killed around 30 people and injured more than 200 in Lahore. Among the dead were seven personnel of the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence, including one of its officers. The ISI may have been the ostensible target, but more than that, the aim was to prove that the Taliban are still relevant.

The images on Pakistan's copious news networks of those fleeing the fighting in the Swat valley were joined by those of the pained faces of mourners in Lahore and Peshawar raising their hands to the heavens. The heavens are often invoked in this Pakistan's latest internal conflict, but the machinations are tragically all too worldly.

When Taliban spokesman Hakimullah Mehsud claimed responsibility for the Lahore attack, he said it was in response to "the innocent people killed (by the army) in Swat". It was an obvious appeal to the now 2.5 million made homeless by the war with the Pakistan Army in the Tribal Areas. If ethnic Pashtuns in the Tribal Areas have to suffer, so the reasoning goes, so too should Punjabis who make up the bulk of the army.

That it can only respond through violence, and even that against fellow, mostly poor, Muslims, says much about the Taliban's long-term vision and the veracity of their claims to be a vanguard

for true Islam.

In short, these latest attacks are a sign of the Taliban's weakness, not their strength. That can only mean more, not less, bombings and violence.

Like a gambler once enriched on the craps tables, the Taliban's political capi-

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tal is as spent as its actions have been morally bankrupt.

As I travelled through displaced person camps to the south and east of Swat, in Mardan, Jalallah and Peshawar, people spoke of their deep hatred for the

Taliban. I spoke to around a hundred people from diverse backgrounds in four camps - to school kids, teachers, mothers, farmers, and small business owners. Many said that the Taliban have been deliberately hiding among civilians, particularly in their villages, effectively

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turning them into human shields. They also noted the Taliban's continuation of hostilities in outlying regions of Swat and the neighbouring areas of Dir and Buner after a peace deal was tenuously reached in February, well before the cur-

n in Pakistan

rent army operation commenced.

There is anger at the army too, but it has, along with the Pakistan government and NGOs too numerous to count, at least provided tents and supplies for some of the displaced - only 20 percent in all according to some estimates, but a

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significant number nevertheless. And while the hot, miserable conditions of the IDP camps cannot be overemphasised, there is an ever-growing national effort at rehabilitation.

The spectre of sectarianism is still

in the air, particularly in Karachi where unions and political parties dominated by the Urdu-speaking community blocked displaced Pashtuns from entering the city. But that move looks to have turned into a political disaster for those trying to paint Pakistan's Pashtun community as 'synonymous with extremism and the Taliban. The impression among the displaced could not have been more different.

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Yet, as with the immediate future of stability in this country, many remain uncertain about whom they should be blaming for all this violence. One source of this uncertainty is continual denial about home-grown militancy. Major religious parties like Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamaat-e-Ulema-Islami refuse to even use the word Taliban. And army spokesman Major General Athar Abbas, our own version of a glib Pentagon spokesman, who issues daily press statements promising the enemy will soon be vanquished, has generally preferred to talk of "miscreants" rather than use the "T" word.

Even rank and file soldiers, whom I met quietly this week, earnestly proclaim

that the culprits could not be the Taliban.

There aren't as many concerns about the nomenclature among the displaced. Under the banner of "Aman Tehreek" or Peace Movement, ordinary villagers, clerics and local NGOs have come together demanding a cohesive, long-term strategy for defeating the Taliban.

"We are inspired by our great leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan," says Swat school teacher and activist Ziauddin Yusufzai in reference to the respected 20th-century Pashtun leader who is often described as the region's Mahatma Gandhi.

"The movement was formed to denounce the three (forms of terrorism) - Taliban, sectarianism, and kidnappings (for ransom)," says NGO worker Fazal Maula.

"The army must eliminate the miscreants," he adds, but only through carefully targeted operations that do a minimum of harm to civilians. Aman Tehreek has prepared a detailed list of political and humanitarian demands that they hope will enable communities devastated by war to resist future Taliban encroachment.

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