

International

Islamabad bids to quell rise in Pakistani Taleban attacks

Hardliner Islamist group ramps up attacks

PESHAWAR: Since the Taleban's takeover of Afghanistan, Pakistan's offshoot of the hardline Islamist group has ramped up attacks on its side of the border, leaving Islamabad scrambling to reach a peace deal. Active in the remote tribal areas of Pakistan, experts say the militant group has been emboldened by the Taleban's successful ousting of world superpower the United States from Afghanistan. Tehreek-e-Taleban Pakistan (TTP) - a separate movement which shares a common history with the Afghan Taleban - plunged the country into a period of horrific violence after forming in 2007.

Also made up mostly of ethnic Pashtuns, it carried out hundreds of suicide bomb attacks and kidnappings across the country, seizing control of border regions and imposing a radical version of Islamic law in territory where it held sway. It was a TTP gunman who opened fire on schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai in her native Swat Valley, before she won the Nobel Peace Prize. The group was also linked to the assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto.



Authorities scrambling to reach a peace deal

But it wasn't until a gun massacre of nearly 150 children at a Peshawar school in 2014 that the military finally crushed the movement and forced its fighters to retreat into Afghanistan. Now, nearly a decade later and with the Afghanistan Taleban back in control in Kabul, Pakistan is trying to quell a TTP comeback. "The (fighters) feel more comfortable after the fall of Kabul to the Taleban, they can now move freely in Afghanistan," a TTP fighter told AFP on condition of anonymity. "They have no fear of US drone strikes. And they can meet and communicate easily."

Attacking security forces

The TTP claimed 32 attacks in August, 37 in September and 24 in October - the highest monthly totals for at least five years, according to their own published data.



MAMOUZAI, Pakistan: Pakistan's Taleban commander Latif Mehsud (center), a close aide to the former chief of the Tehreek-e-Taleban Pakistan (TTP), Hakimullah Mehsud, sits on an armed vehicle in Mamouzai area of the Orakzai Agency, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. — AFP

lished data. Across all of 2020, when the United States first pledged to start withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan, it claimed 149 assaults - three times more than in 2019. The renewed confidence became apparent in October when the group's leader Noor Wali Mehsud came out of hiding and was photographed shaking hands with residents and speaking in public - something unimaginable just a few months ago.

More than a dozen Islamist factions have since July 2020 rallied under his leadership. In an attempt to improve the TTP's image and distinguish them from the Islamic State's extremism, Mehsud has largely taken the group in a new direction - sparing civilians and ordering attacks only on security and law enforcement officials. Recent attacks have been far less deadly than the mass casualty bombings that once terrorized the country.

'A second chance'

For Islamabad, part of the strategy to keep the threat of the TTP at bay is by accommodating them. Past mid-way in his first term, Prime Minister Khan is keen to shore up support from Pakistan's conservative base, and

rapprochement with groups such as the TTP will appeal to rural voters even while angering the military. Khan announced in October that the government was in talks with the TTP for the first time since 2014, facilitated by Afghanistan's new leaders.

Both sides have announced a truce until at least December 9, while they hammer out an agreement. "Those people who want to come back and respect our law and constitution, we would like to give them a second chance," said Fawad Chaudhry, Pakistan's information minister. Neither side has openly divulged details about the negotiating points. The release of about 100 TTP fighters was a key demand for the militants to agree to a ceasefire, a source from the group told AFP.

The fighters are also appealing to be able to come out of hiding and return to the tribal areas. But without the support of elders - hundreds of whom have been killed over the years - any deal risks being meaningless. "It will be difficult for them to return without laying down arms because they have enemies there, they have killed people," Baadshah, a tribal elder, told AFP in Peshawar. — AFP

Singapore death row man's family pleads for his life

TANJUNG RAMBUTAN: The sister of a Malaysian man facing imminent execution despite concerns he is mentally disabled has pleaded with Singapore to give him a "second chance". Nagaenthran K Dharmalingam, sentenced to death in 2010 for trafficking a small amount of heroin into Singapore, was originally set to be hanged last week after losing a series of appeals. The execution in the city-state, which has some of the world's toughest drugs laws, was postponed after the 33-year-old contracted the coronavirus, but campaigners fear the delay will be short.

His family are not giving up, however, with his sister Sarmila Dharmalingam urging the city-state to "give him a second chance". "We hope the Singapore government will spare his life," the 35-year-old told AFP in an interview Sunday from the family home in Tanjung Rambutan, in the northern Malaysian state of Perak. "He is suffering from an intellectual disability."

Nagaenthran's case has sparked a storm of criticism, with the European Union and United Nations rights experts speaking out against it, and a clemency petition getting around 85,000 signatures. A last-ditch court challenge is being mounted and while chances of success look slim, Sarmila and her family are holding out hope. "All our family members are holding prayers for his life to be spared," said the housewife, who is ethnic Indian and a member of the Hindu minority in mostly Muslim Malaysia. "I believe in miracles... With God's grace, a miracle will happen."

Last-ditch challenge

Nagaenthran was arrested aged 21 as he tried to enter Singapore from neighboring Malaysia with a bundle of heroin weighing about 43 grams - equivalent to about three tablespoons - strapped to his thigh. Campaigners say he has an IQ of just 69, a level recognized as an intellectual disability, was coerced into transporting the drugs, and was struggling with an alcohol problem at the time. But Singapore, which



KUALA LUMPUR: Activists holding placards attend a candlelight vigil against the impending execution of Nagaenthran K Dharmalingam, sentenced to death for trafficking heroin into Singapore, outside the Singaporean embassy in Kuala Lumpur. — AFP

insists the death penalty is an effective deterrent against crime, has shown little sign of heeding calls for clemency.

The home affairs ministry said earlier this month that psychiatrists had stated during previous court proceedings that Nagaenthran was not intellectually disabled. Legal rulings also concluded that he "clearly understood the nature of his acts", which were aimed at paying off debts, it said in a statement. A written appeal from Malaysia's Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob was also brushed off, with his Singapore counterpart Lee Hsien Loong responding that Nagaenthran had been given "full due process under the law". Sarmila - one of Nagaenthran's three siblings - recalled the shock when her family received a letter from Singapore authorities on October 26 informing them her brother would be hanged on November 10. Preparations for the Hindu festival of Diwali were halted so the family could figure out how his mother, who works as a cleaner, and other relatives could travel to Singapore to see him before the execution.

Nagaenthran's eldest sister, Sarmila struggles to accept her brother is a convicted drug smuggler and still has fond memories of playing childhood games with him. He was a "lovable person. He was very caring", she said. During more than a decade behind bars, Nagaenthran developed a passion for arts and crafts, making cards for his family back home to mark occasions such as Mother's Day. — AFP

Women to sue Qatar over invasive airport searches

SYDNEY: A group of women subjected to invasive gynaeological searches at Doha airport will sue Qatari authorities, seeking redress for an ordeal that sparked global condemnation, their lawyer said yesterday. Women on 10 Qatar Airways flights from Doha, including 13 Australians, were subjected to the examinations late last year as authorities searched for the mother of a newborn found abandoned in an airport bathroom. The incident caused outrage, and fuelled concerns about Qatar's treatment of women as the Gulf state prepares to receive thousands of foreign visitors for the 2022 football World Cup.

Damian Sturzaker, from Sydney-based firm Marque Lawyers, said seven affected passengers now plan legal action to "send a message to Qatari authorities that you can't treat women... in this manner". "The group of women have suffered enormous distress on the evening concerned, now just over a year ago, and they continue to suffer distress and ill effects and trauma as a result of what occurred," he told AFP.

Sturzaker said the women were seeking a formal apology, compensation, and protection for future passengers transiting through the airport. Qatar is an ultra-conservative Muslim monarchy, where sex and childbirth outside of marriage are punishable by jail. Ahead of the World Cup, the country has struggled to reassure critics that its promises on women's rights, labor relations and democracy are credible. Facing potentially devastating commercial and reputational damage after the incident, Qatar vowed to guarantee the future "safety and security" of passengers.

The country's prime minister also issued an apology, while an airport police officer who oversaw the searches was reportedly convicted. But Sturzaker said the women had not been made aware of any improvements to airport procedures and their attempts to seek mediation had been unsuccessful. They now wanted to highlight their case ahead of the FIFA tournament, to ensure other travelers were well-informed before visiting Qatar, he added. — AFP



NEW DELHI: Commuters make their way along a street amid heavy smoggy conditions in New Delhi yesterday. — AFP

Delhi resists call for 'pollution lockdown'

NEW DELHI: The Delhi government pushed back yesterday against a call by India's top court to declare a "pollution lockdown", as children stayed away from school for a week because of dangerous smog levels. Air quality in Delhi - among the world's most polluted cities - regularly plummets to the "severe" category in winter with levels of harmful particulates at dangerous levels. On Saturday, the Supreme Court suggested imposing for the first time a "pollution lockdown", effectively confining the megacity's 20 million people to their homes. In a submission to the court yesterday, the city government said that such a step would only be "meaningful" if states surrounding Delhi are also included.

One of the contributors to the smog that hangs over the city in winter is smoke from farmers burning their crop residue in neighboring states. Delhi is also ringed by several satellite cities like Noida and Ghaziabad that are home to millions of people. "Given Delhi's compact size, a lockdown would have limited impact on the air

quality regime," the Delhi government said. It conceded, however, that industry was the biggest contributor in the city's air pollution followed by transport and dust emanating from roads and construction sites.

It said the farm fires were contributing only four percent to the city's PM 2.5 - the most harmful particulate matter that is responsible for chronic lung and heart diseases. Last week, PM 2.5 levels in the city touched 500, more than 30 times maximum safe limits according to the World Health Organization. Yesterday, PM 2.5 levels

ceased after winds dispersed the pollutants and hovered at around 160, according to the government's System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting And Research.

Delhi's chief minister on Saturday announced a week-long closure of all government offices as well as schools, while also banning construction activity until November 20. A 2020 report by Swiss organization IQAir found that 22 of the world's 30 most polluted cities were in India, with Delhi ranked the most polluted capital globally. — AFP

News in brief

Gun attacks leave 11 dead

SILAO: At least 11 people, including two children, died in two armed attacks in the Mexican state of Guanajuato, authorities said Sunday in the country's latest spasm of violence. Gunmen opened fire on a group of people in a house in the municipality of Silao, killing three men, two women and a child, the state public prosecutor said. Local media said the attack happened during a child's party on Saturday. Later that night in the municipality of Apaseo el Grande, armed men killed five members of the same family, including a 14-year-old girl, while an eight-month old baby was wounded in the arm. The central state of Guanajuato has become one of the most violent in Mexico due to an ongoing battle between the Santa Rosa de Lima and Jalisco New Generation drug cartels. The gangs are fighting over control of the lucrative drug trafficking and stolen fuel markets. — AFP

Radical anti-vaccine activists

ROME: Italian police yesterday raided anti-vaccine activists alleged to have used an online chat to call for violence, including "hangings" and "shootings," against people supporting COVID-19 restrictions. The "Basta Dittatura" (Enough of the Dictatorship) chat on the Telegram app had tens of thousands of members and was used to organize demonstrations against Italy's so-called "Green Pass", police in the northern city of Turin said. The pass is proof the bearer has been vaccinated, has undergone a recent negative test or has had COVID-19, and is obligatory to access all workplaces, as well as social venues such as cinemas. The searches, across 16 cities, targeted 17 of the most radical activists on the chat, which was "characterized by a persistent incitement to hatred and to the commission of serious crimes", police said. — AFP

Knife attack at Fukushima

FUKUSHIMA: A man attacked an elderly woman with a knife in front of Fukushima station in northeast Japan yesterday, police and local media said, the latest in a string of recent assaults on and around the country's train network. The attacker has been taken into custody, regional police said, with local media reporting he had been caught by bystanders. A woman in her 80s was hospitalized after the assault, national broadcaster NHK reported. Television station TV-U Fukushima said the victim sustained an injury in her abdomen but was able to speak. "A man with a knife attacked (another person) in front of Fukushima Station today. Patrol cars rushed to the scene. The man has been taken into custody," Fukushima Prefecture Police tweeted. Police officials declined to comment further. — AFP

Colombia monitoring Hezbollah

BOGOTA: Colombia said it is monitoring the activities there of the pro-Iranian group Hezbollah, accusing it of having conducted criminal activities. "Two months ago we had to deal with a situation where we had to organize an operation to capture and expel two criminals commissioned by Hezbollah with the intention of committing a criminal act in Colombia," Defense Minister Diego Molano said in an interview with the daily El Tiempo. He provided no details of the government operation. But the newspaper, citing sources in Colombia's military intelligence services, said the Lebanese Shiite movement was spying on American and Israeli businessmen in Colombia. Colombia has a sizable Lebanese community. Hezbollah has been reported to have a presence in Venezuela and other Latin American countries. — AFP

Jihadists kill four soldiers

BAMAKO: Four Malian soldiers were killed by suspected jihadists Sunday and several others wounded in an attack northeast of the capital Bamako, near the border with Mauritania, the army said on social media. The soldiers, on post at Guire, in the Nara region, fought off an attack by "an armed terrorist group" said a statement from the army, using a term generally used to refer to jihadists. Four soldiers were killed and another 14 wounded, while six of the attackers were also killed, they added. Mali has been struggling to contain an Islamist insurgency which first broke out in the north of the country in 2012 before spreading to the centre and neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger. Thousands of people have been killed and hundreds of thousands have fled their homes, while the economic impact on one of the world's poorest countries has been devastating. — AFP