

The Mumbai Massacres And Pakistan's Nightmare To Come

An Interview With Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy



Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy is chairman of the physics department at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad, a frequent commentator on nuclear and security matters, and a member of the Permanent Monitoring Panel on Terrorism of the World Federation of Scientists. This interview was conducted by Cristina Otten for FOCUS and may be found on-line (in German) at:

http://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/tid-12856/pakistan-die-menschen-sind-blind-vor-hass_aid_355157.html

Tensions between Pakistan and India have been growing after the Mumbai attacks. Are we close to a military escalation?

In spite of vociferous demands by the Indian public, Manmohan Singh's government has withstood the pressure to conduct cross-border strikes into Pakistan. Correspondingly, in spite of the bitter criticism by Islamic parties, Pakistan's government has taken some action against the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT), the jihadist organization that is quite probably behind the attacks. For now, the tension has eased somewhat but another attack could push India over the fence.

What makes the LeT so different from other militant groups? Is Pakistan really moving against it?

LeT, one of the largest militant groups in Pakistan, was established over 15 years ago. It had the full support of the Pakistani military and Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) for over a decade because it focussed upon fighting Indian rule in Muslim Kashmir. Today it is one of the very few extremist groups left that does not attack the Pakistani army and state; in contrast almost all others have turned into mortal enemies. We now hear that a few members of LeT, who were named by India, have been arrested. Time will tell whether this was a serious move, or if this was a ruse to ease the enormous pressure against Pakistan. If serious, then the Army and ISI will have earned the bitter enmity of yet another former ally. They are afraid of a repeat of their experience with Jaish-e-Muhammad, a formerly supported Islamic militant group that now is responsible for extreme brutalities, including torture and decapitations, of Pakistani soldiers captured in FATA. It's a nightmarish situation for the Pakistan Army.

How have Pakistanis reacted to the Mumbai massacre?

The initial reaction was of sympathy. I did not see any celebrations, contrary to those I saw after 911. But then, as the Indian TV channels started accusing Pakistan and demanding that it be bombed in retaliation, the reaction turned to that of anger and then flat denial – Pakistanis did not want to accept that this attack was done by Pakistanis or had been launched from Pakistani soil. Subsequently one saw amazing mental calisthenics. Popular TV anchors, and their guests, invoked far-out conspiracy theories. Years ago, some of the same anchors had confidently (but wrongly) claimed that Kathmandu-Delhi Indian Airlines Flight 814 (IC814) had been hijacked by RAW to malign Pakistan. They had also ridiculed the notion that Pakistan was involved in the Kargil invasion. Now, pointing to the RSS hand in the Samjhota Express bombing, they are alternately ascribing the Mumbai attacks to radical Hindus, and to Jews and Americans. It is sad to see intelligent persons losing their marbles.

Pakistan has always stressed that it will deliver the first nuclear strike if it feels threatened by India? Do you see any signs on the Pakistani sign to carry out its threat?

About a week before the Mumbai massacre, President Asif Ali Zardari had given the assurance that Pakistan would not use nuclear weapons first. India had announced a no first use policy almost ten years ago. But Zardari is not taken seriously by the Pakistani generals who actually control the Bomb, and the Indian NFU declaration is frankly of no consequence. Cross-border raids by India could well ignite a conventional war. If that happens, all bets are off and it could escalate without warning into a nuclear conflict. For many years US defence strategists, belonging to various think tanks and war colleges, have been simulating conflicts between Pakistan and India. They say that a conventional war will almost certainly lead to a nuclear conclusion. Fear of nuclear weapons has made deterrence work. More accurately, deterrence has worked only thus far. No guarantees can be given for the future.

Why did the assassins choose India instead of committing attacks against Western allies in Afghanistan?

LeT is based around Lahore, which is on the Pakistan-India border, in a town called Muridke. This has a huge militant training and charity complex. LeT's membership is mostly Punjabi, which makes it linguistically and culturally quite unsuited for fighting in Afghanistan. You could say that LeT is an India-specific, Kashmir-specific group. Indeed, over the years it has had many military successes in Kashmir

against Indian forces. But LeT, like other militant groups in Pakistan, sees a nexus between Indians, Americans, and Israelis. Hence they are all seen as enemies and fair game.

What did the Mumbai terrorists want?

No demands were made and all hostages were killed. So the purpose of the attack was never formally declared. On the other hand, the stated goals of LeT and similar organizations based in Pakistan leave little doubt. The attack clearly sought to hurt India's economy and its newly acquired reputation as an economic powerhouse, and to create a climate of war between India and Pakistan. If Pakistan moves its troops towards the eastern border the pressure on the Taliban in FATA, which is close to the western border, would be lessened. Still another reason would be to encourage pogroms against Muslims in India. This would swell the ranks of the extremists, and also have the added benefit of destabilizing both the Pakistani and Indian states. Finally, the attack was a means of releasing hatred against non-Muslims.

What differences and parallels do you see between the Mumbai attacks and the attack in the in Marriott Hotel in Islamabad?

They were quite dissimilar in how they were executed. The Mumbai attacks were extremely intricate, used GPS and voice-over-internet protocols for communication purposes, involved extensive military training, and probably required planning over a period of a year. The goal was to kill foreigners, particularly Jews and Americans, although Muslims were also collateral casualties. On the other hand, the Marriot bombing in Islamabad was a relatively simple affair involving a single dump-truck with a suicide bomber, and its victims were principally Muslims. The basic purpose, however, was similar – to destabilize the Pakistani state, take revenge on the US (2 of the 58 killed were US marines), and raise the cost of war in Afghanistan and FATA.

In the West experts talk about a new dimension of terror in India. Do you also see tight connections between Lashkar-e-Taiba and al-Qaida?

One is naturally tempted to guess a nexus between LeT and Al-Qaida. Of course, they do share similar goals. But in the world that extremists inhabit, mere similarity is insufficient – it has to be much closer than that and small ideological differences are amplified out of proportion. As yet there is no proof of joint operations or cooperation. So presently this is no more than a plausible hypothesis.

What role does Kashmir play in the current conflict?

Since 1987, Kashmir has been in a state of upheaval. Fraudulent elections conducted by India led to widespread resentment, followed by a horrifically bloody crackdown by Indian security forces. Pakistan's army saw opportunity in this, and waged a covert war in Kashmir using jihadists to "bleed India with a thousand cuts". The United Jihad Council, which oversees the activities of an estimated 22 Pakistan-based organizations, acts outside of the domain of the Pakistani state but it has had active support from the country's army and intelligence agencies. The Kargil conflict in 1999 brought matters to a head when General Musharraf initiated a war with the assistance of jihadist forces. This inflicted severe damage on Indian forces but Pakistan was ultimately forced to withdraw. Jihadists subsequently celebrated General Musharraf as a hero, and vilified Nawaz Sharif for a cowardly surrender.

In January 2002, General Musharraf had declared that no groups on Pakistani territory would be permitted to launch cross-border attacks. Was this promise fulfilled?

Subsequently there indeed was a decline in cross-border infiltrations, and some lessening of the covert support given by Pakistani agencies. But this was far from zero and they maintained a strong presence. On a personal note: soon after the terrible October 8, 2005 earthquake, I had gone to various areas of Azad Kashmir for relief work. There I found the Lashkar-i-Tayyaba, Jaish-e-Muhammad, Sipah-i-Sahaba, and other banned jihadist organizations operating openly and freely using military-style six-wheeled vehicles, as well as displaying their weapons. Their relief efforts were far better organized than that of the Pakistan army and, in fact, they were pulling injured soldiers out of the rubble. When I mentioned this fact to General Musharraf a few months later at a Kashmir peace conference, he was very angry at me for discussing a tabooed subject.

On the one hand, we have radical extremists in Pakistan who want to bring strict Islamic law into force and demonize the West. On the other hand, however, the government presents itself as a friend and ally of the United States. Could you please describe this antagonism and explain where it originates from? What does this tell us about the growth of extremism in Pakistan?

Radical extremism is the illegitimate offspring of a union between the United States under Ronald Reagan, and Pakistan under General Zia-

ul-Haq. Twenty five years ago, the two countries had joined up to harness Islamic fighters for expelling the Soviets from Afghanistan. The US was quite happy to see radical Islam spreading because it served its goal at the time. Simultaneously, Pakistan saw a major social transformation under General Zia. Prayers in government departments were deemed compulsory, floggings were carried out publicly, punishments were meted out to those who did not fast in Ramadan, selection for university academic posts required that the candidate demonstrate knowledge of Islamic teachings, and jihad was declared essential for every Muslim. But today the government is in open conflict with the radicals. It has to deal with a spontaneous groundswell of Islamic zeal. The notion of an Islamic state – as yet in some amorphous and diffuse form – is more popular today than ever before as people look desperately for miracles to rescue a failing state. Even though the government and military in Pakistan are allied formally to the US, the people are strongly against the US.

What parts of the Pakistani society support al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden?

Baluchistan and Sind are far less supportive than Punjab or the NWFP. The amazing fact is that parts of Pakistan's upper class – which is very Westernized but also very anti-Western – also support the Islamists. I find it tragic that there is no uproar in the country when Taliban suicide bombers target mosques, funerals, hospitals, girls schools, and slaughter policemen and soldiers. People have become so anti-American that it has blinded them to these atrocities. Even the Pakistani left is thoroughly confused and mistakes the Taliban as anti-imperialist fighters.

And where do you stand on this matter? Do you see anything that the Islamists have to offer?

The people of Pakistan need and deserve everything that people everywhere else want. This means food, jobs, houses to live in, a system of justice and governance, and protection of life and property. Equally, people need freedom of worship and thought, education for both males and females, and protection of their freedom as summarized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These are everybody's primary needs. After this – a distinct second – come matters that deal with national sovereignty, foreign policy, various global issues, etc. Frankly, I cannot see Pakistan's Islamists offering anything positive. They are against population planning, educating females, tolerating other sects or religions, etc. They neither know the outside world, nor want to know it. All they know – and know well – is how to make war. Fortunately, as their rout in the recent elections

showed, most Pakistanis do not want to live under their narrow doctrines and belief system.

President Asif Ali Zardari promised to hunt terrorists and to destroy terror camps in Pakistan? But his affirmations seem to be halfhearted. Can't he do more or doesn't he want do more?

It is not up to him to do more. The real power lies with the Pakistan Army, which is still undecided as to who the real enemy is. The Army has lost nearly two thousand soldiers in battles with extremists. But it still cannot convince itself that they constitute an existentialist threat to Pakistan. One can understand this reluctance. Over the years, officers and soldiers were recruited into the Army on the basis that they were defenders of Islam and would always fight India. Instead they now have to fight forces that claim to be even better defenders of Islam. Worse, they are no longer being called upon to fight India, which is what they were trained for. So there is confusion and demoralization, and practically zero public understanding or support. Therefore, Pakistani soldiers are not fighting well at all in FATA. Many have surrendered without a fight. This is the first time in my life that I feel the Army should be supported, but only to the extent that it fights the extremists without killing innocents. Unfortunately, the Army's current tactic is to flatten villages suspected of harbouring terrorists. The collateral damage is huge and completely unacceptable.

Pakistan has armed and financed the Taliban after the US invasion of Afghanistan. The CIA pays Pakistan to arrest al-Qaeda operatives, but Pakistan uses the money to fund the Taliban resurgence in northwest Pakistan. Any changes under the new president?

It will take time – and perhaps still more suffering – to kick an old habit. Even though the Army is being literally slaughtered by the Taliban, it continues to make a distinction between the “good” and “bad” Taliban. The good ones are, by definition, those who attack only US/Nato or Indian interests in Afghanistan, but do not attack the Pakistan Army. The good ones are seen as essential for having a friendly Afghanistan when, as will surely happen some day, the Americans withdraw. Among the good Taliban are jihadist leaders such as Jalaludin Haqqani. On the other hand, Baitullah Mehsud or Maulana Fazlullah, are considered bad Taliban because they attack the Army and the state. Interestingly, Army inspired propaganda paints the bad Taliban as Indian agents – which is quite ridiculous. This false differentiation is the real reason for the Army's ambivalence and inability to deal effectively with the Taliban menace.

Pakistan is a nuclear state. Should we fear that one day the Taliban or al-Qaida could get access to the nuclear arsenal?

I am more worried about extremists having access to nuclear materials, particularly highly enriched uranium, rather than a completed weapon. Because of secrecy requirements, it is very difficult for outsiders to monitor the output of uranium enrichment or plutonium reprocessing plants. Interestingly, we are seeing a shift away from nuclear weapons in the West. The unusability of nuclear weapons by national states is being recognized even by mainstream politicians in the US and Europe because they no longer guarantee the monopoly of power. This makes possible the ultimate de-legitimization of nuclear weapons, and hence winding down of fissile material production globally. This may be our best long-term hope of countering the nuclear terrorist threat, whether by Al-Qaida or other terrorist groups. Meanwhile, in the short term, great care must be given to watching over suspicious nuclear activities.

What should India do and what is your forecast for the region?

India should not attack Pakistan. This would be counter-productive in every possible way. Even if it wins a war, it will be a pyrrhic victory. On the other hand, a small attack can be no more than a pin-prick. This would do more harm than good because it will unite the army and the jihadists who, at this juncture in history, are in serious confrontation with each other. Worse, even a small attack could lead to large response, and then escalate out of control. Nuclear armed countries simply cannot afford skirmishes. I think India's demand for action against jihadist groups is entirely legitimate, but this must be done by Pakistan, which is susceptible to international pressure. To get rid of militants and extremists – whether Muslim or Hindu – is in the best interests of both Pakistan and India.

Will Pakistani extremists win or can the West still bring about a rebound?

It's a grim situation but not irreversible. The invasion of Iraq, and US imperial policies over the last decades, created a hatred for Americans that ultimately translated into support for all who fight them. Most Pakistanis do not approve of the Taliban's fundamental and primitivist social agenda. But, by virtue of fighting the Americans, popular sentiment is still with them. So, reducing anti-Americanism is the key. One hopes that Barack Obama will be able to undo some of the harm his country did to Pakistan. Let's see. But basically it is for Pakistanis – not Indians or anybody else – to fight it out. We Pakistanis have to realize that this is a war for our very existence as a civilized nation.

Western support for Pakistan must be very judicious and not too overt. Similarly, isolating Pakistan, or inflicting harsh punitive measures, could easily backfire. The Taliban and allied extremists have a real chance of winning in Pakistan. The state is already crumbling in places and it could disintegrate quite rapidly, leaving the fanatics in charge. One cannot think of a bigger disaster for Pakistan.
