



The Terrorist Attack on Students at Charsadda, Pakistan

*Dr. Dhrubajyoti Bhattacharjee **

At least 21 people were killed as gunmen armed with grenades and Kalashnikovs attacked a university in Charsadda on January 20, 2016. The militants scaled the walls of Bacha Khan University and opened fire on students and teachers, who were preparing to host a poetry recital competition to commemorate the death anniversary of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a popular ethnic Pashtun independence activist after whom the university is named.¹

Attacking a soft target like a school or a university immediately makes it a news that spreads like wildfire impacting all segments of the society. The Army School at Peshawar and the Charsadda university terrorist attacks remain glaring examples of such attacks. Targeting students has not been something new for extremists and terrorists; the earliest records show a terrorist attack on a school bus that took place in Israel, killing 2 students, injuring 28 in 1968. The trend of attacking such soft targets is rather new in Pakistan, the earlier such attack being on a school bus at Peshawar on September 13, 2011. Attacks on schools or killing children have rather been a more common feature in Afghanistan.² The tactic of attacking educational institutes has been used by Boko Haram in Nigeria and Taliban in Afghanistan. But from 2012 onwards, the intensity of attacks on schools and educational institutions has been on the rise in Pakistan. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), "Nine hundred schools have been attacked between 2012-2014 by the militants in FATA and KPK alone."³

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the militant group, who was behind the Peshawar attacks and now a faction of the TTP, has claimed the responsibility for the Bacha Khan University attacks. It is following a regional agenda. Umar Mansoor, who was responsible for the Peshawar attacks, claimed responsibility stating that such attack was in retaliation for military operations against the group. But another spokesman, Muhammad Khurasani, from the Pakistani Taliban's central organization, disavowed any role, which brings out the factional rivalry between the terrorist organisations.⁴ These groups also want the enforcement of Sharia (Islamic Law) in the areas of FATA and KPK and they think that by attacking schools, they are removing the state buildings where un-Islamic education is being imparted by the un-Islamic state of Pakistan. Schools have come under attack also due to other reasons. The security forces of Pakistan engaged in a crackdown against the outlaws in FATA, KPK and Baluchistan have been using schools as their base camps. This is because school buildings come already equipped with the facilities of a bathroom, kitchen and spacious rooms for keeping ammunition, and providing shelter and rest to the military personnel. The militants of TTP have been attacking these school-cum-military-bases to hit the security forces involved in the crackdown against them.

Taking cosmetic steps towards terrorist and extremist groups, the state's response has been ambiguous, ad hoc and weak. After every such attack, there are reshuffling of policies, arrests of people at random, and statements from every media, political and social outlet, blaming the government, the neighbourhood, the policies, or the leadership, something that lasts for around a month, even after a heinous attack like Peshawar, which occurred on December 2014. There were Pakistanis like Maulana Abdul Aziz, Imam of the *Lal Masjid*, who declined to designate the assassinated children as martyrs, supporting the action of the terrorists. Terrorists also attack educational institutes in retaliation to Operation *Zarb-e-Azb*. The Peshawar massacre was a case in point. The Taliban spokesperson, Muhammad Khurasani issued this statement after the attack, "We want the Pakistan Army to feel the pain of seeing their loved ones killed."⁵

Analysts have provided many suggestions after every such terrorist attack, such as, no use of school buildings as military bases, strict security of educational institutes,

training of students to neutralize the militants attack, immediate rescue operation by the law enforcement agencies, dismantling the ideological roots of militants, elimination of militant leadership and formation of a separate counter-attack strategy for educational institutions.⁶ But such recommendations are soon sidelined and forgotten till another such terrorist attack shakes the Pakistani society.

Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* has been commended by the government as well as international observers, but the military till date continues to turn a blind eye to certain militant groups, particularly those that target India and those individuals and groups, who get the protection of elements from within the state. And while the wider Taliban movement appears weak and divided, some factions have in recent weeks renewed their violent campaign against targets in Peshawar, the capital of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province.⁷ After a year during which the Pakistani Taliban finally seemed to be pushed to the margin, with attacks at their lowest pace in a decade throughout the nation, the Charsadda attack renewed worries that terrorism, even if diminished, has survived and retained its capacity for brutality. The 2014 assault in Peshawar, in particular, seemed to galvanize fragmented public opinion about how to deal with jihadist militancy. And it set the conditions for a harsh army crackdown on the group in which more than 300 prisoners have been hanged in the past year, some under a new network of military courts.⁸

HRCP made it clear that Pakistan will invite greater perils if the lessons learnt from Charsadda are not heeded.⁹ The government needs to shake up the entire establishment, all parallel and invisible parts of the government, defence and intelligence apparatus, realising that terrorism of any form or manner needs to be rooted out of Pakistani society for good. Only face saving arrests or detentions of terrorist assets, later to be released on bail, is going to rebound on them in some form or the other. The more the terrorists are hunted in the tribal areas, the more the risk of softer targets being attacked intensifies. The government has to prioritise how to keep the younger generation safe and secure.

There is an immediate need for the Pakistani government, in collaboration with its security agencies, to issue a White Paper in the Pakistani legislation, which would not only strengthen internal, but also regional confidence in the Pakistani government

establishment.

There is also a need for taking cognisance of Internal Security Acts present in Singapore and Malaysia, which would facilitate to clamp down on agent provocateurs and tacit supporters of terrorist groups. There is also a serious need to formulate and undertake a Comprehensive De-radicalisation Programme, which would set benchmarks and accepted norms for all individuals, groups and organisations within the state. Selective discrimination against selected groups and accommodative rules for anti-India terrorist fronts would do no good to the Pakistani army as well as civilian establishment, and they need to earnestly adopt policies and methods that identify all terrorists as enemies of the state rather than selecting some as assets.

** Dr. Dhrubajyoti Bhattacharjee, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.
The Views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

End Notes

¹ "Another 'APS'; 21 Martyred," *Daily Times Pakistan*, January 21, 2016, <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/national/21-Jan-2016/another-aps-21-martyred>

² Robert Johnston, "Terrorist and Criminal Attacks Targeting Children," *Johnston Archive*, May 22, 2015, <http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/terrorism/wrjp39ch.html>.

³ Waqar Jappa, "TTP and BLA: Killing Children and Bombing Schools for Two Very Different Reasons," *The Nation*, July 13, 2015, <http://nation.com.pk/blogs/13-Jul-2015/ttp-and-bla-killing-children-and-bombing-schools-for-two-very-different-reasons>.

⁴ Sophia Saifi, "At Least 22 Killed in Attack on Bacha Khan University in Pakistan," CNN, January 21, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/20/asia/pakistan-university-militant-attack/>; Ali Akbar, "APS Mastermind Claims Bacha Khan University Attack, 21 Killed," *Dawn*, January 22, 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1234200>.

⁵ "Pakistan Resumes Death Penalty for Terrorists," *Al Arabiya*, December 17, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/asia/2014/12/17/Pakistan-in-mourning-for-141-killed-in-Taliban-school-.html>.

⁶ Waqar Jappa, "TTP and BLA: Killing Children and Bombing Schools for Two Very Different Reasons," *The Nation*, July 13, 2015, <http://nation.com.pk/blogs/13-Jul-2015/ttp-and-bla-killing-children-and-bombing-schools-for-two-very-different-reasons>.

⁷ Declan Walsh, Ihsanullah Tipu and Ismail Khan, "Taliban Attack at Bacha Khan University in Pakistan Renews Fears," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/21/world/asia/bacha-khan-university-attack-charsadda.html? r=0>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "HRCP Calls for NAP Review," *Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP)*, January 21, 2016, <http://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/hrcp-calls-for-nap-review/>.