**Karachi Airport Attack Signals Alarming Tactical Shift by Taliban**

Karachi:  It was the shoes that betrayed Corporal Faiz Mohammad's would-be killers.

When 10 Taliban militants attacked Pakistan's busiest airport on Sunday night, sparking a five-hour gun battle that killed at least 34 people, Mohammad and his fellow officers from the Airports Security Force (ASF) were the first line of defence.  
  
"There was a moment of confusion because the militants had the same ASF uniforms as us," said Mohammad, 30. "But then we saw their shoes." ASF officers wear black leather shoes, but the men who stormed Jinnah International Airport in Karachi, Pakistan's chaotic commercial capital, wore white-soled sneakers.  
  
All 10 militants were dead by dawn, shot down by the security forces or blown up by their own suicide vests. That the Taliban failed in its main objective - to hijack an aircraft and hold its passengers hostage - should bring no comfort to embattled Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, since the attack signals an alarming shift in tactics by an increasingly formidable foe.  
  
The strike at the airport in Karachi, home to 18 million people, deals a blow to Sharif's bid to attract foreign investors to revive the economy. It has also destroyed prospects for peace talks with the Taliban and made an all-out military offensive against militant strongholds along the Afghan border a near-certainty.  
  
Government air strikes on the strongholds in the North Waziristan region triggered the tactical shift, said sources at Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), as the Pakistani Taliban is formally known. Angered by the raids and anticipating a ground assault, the militants are targeting Pakistan's heartland.  
  
A top Taliban commander confirmed to Reuters that attacks involving aircraft were part of a new strategy to counter the government's preparations for a full-scale operation against them in North Waziristan.  
  
"We decided to change our strategy and hit their main economic centres," he said. "They will kill innocent people by their bombs and we will hit their nerve-centres in major cities."  
  
Tariq Azeem, a senior official in Sharif's administration, said a full-scale military operation was imminent in North Waziristan, and seemed resigned to it sparking terror attacks elsewhere in Pakistan. "Everybody knows there is going to be blowback," he said.  
  
PATTERN OF MUMBAI, WESTGATE MALL  
  
The Taliban is most likely to rely on small militant teams, emulating the protracted, high-impact operations like those in Mumbai in 2008 and Nairobi's Westgate mall last year.  
"In Mumbai, and in Kenya, you will find a lot of similarities," said Muhammad Amir Rana, director of the Islamabad-based think tank Pak Institute for Peace Studies. "They (the Taliban) are adopting this as their prime strategy."  
  
The similarities between the Karachi and Mumbai incidents are startling and instructive.  
The attack on Mumbai, India's largest city, was carried out by a Pakistan-based anti-India group called Lashkar-e-Taiba, or Army of the Pure. It lasted three days, killed 166 people and transfixed the world.  
  
As with Karachi, it was meticulously planned and involved well-trained and heavily armed militants. In both cases, a 10-man team quickly split into pairs and carried provision-stuffed knapsacks in preparation for a long siege. In Mumbai, militants used mobile phones to coordinate with handlers in Pakistan and with each other in the heat of battle. Their Karachi counterparts were also seen using mobile phones during the assault.  
  
Lashkar-e-Taiba has said it has no connection with any attacks on Pakistani soil and there is no evidence that it works with the Taliban. India accuses elements in Pakistan's large army and its pervasive Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) spy agency of shielding or working with the group.  
  
But neither the military nor the ISI could forestall the havoc caused by 10 men who got out of a minivan near Karachi's cargo terminal on Sunday night.  
  
The attack began at 11.05 p.m., with five of the militants breaching the Fokker Gate with assault rifles and grenades. Minutes later, as the ASF fought back, a second five-strong squad attacked the nearby Cargo Gate. Both gates granted access to the cargo area in the airport's west.  
  
Azeem, the administration official, praised the ASF while admitting how hard it was to protect the sprawling airport.  
  
"You need almost two brigades to cover . . . every inch of it," he said. "Any entrance will have two, three, four people who are fully armed, but one burst of machinegun (fire) will kill all four of them and you can enter."  
  
When Faiz Mohammed ran across the tarmac, shouldering his AK-47, to reinforce his fellow ASF officers, four were already dead. "Our men were fighting relentlessly," he said.  
  
Mohammad was shot in the thigh and, like other wounded ASF, waited hours until it was safe for ambulances to evacuate him.  
  
"The ASF put up very stiff resistance and that apparently sowed panic among the attackers, who then split up and were eventually taken out by security forces," said a senior Pakistani security official, speaking on condition of anonymity.  
  
The militants' dispersal added to the mayhem and drew in more security forces.  
  
By 11.30 p.m., a contingent of police and paramilitary Rangers had arrived at the airport, followed 30 minutes later by an army unit. They formed what Azeem called "the second or the third layer" of airport security which stopped the militant advance on the main passenger terminal further east.  
  
"I WAS TERRIFIED"  
  
The gunfire was now punctuated by the boom of militants firing rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). They had come prepared for a long fight.  
  
Their knapsacks contained water, medicine and food. Some were spotted using cellphones during the attack, said a security official involved in the investigation, although it was unclear who they were talking to - each other, or distant commanders.  
  
Phimraphat Wisetsoem could see and hear explosions from her seat on a Thai International Airways aircraft. It was trapped near the runway along with an Emirates jet and contained hundreds of passengers. Phimraphat suspected that hijackers in disguise had already boarded her plane.  
  
"I was terrified," she told reporters as she arrived back in Bangkok. "I sat still and didn't dare move around." Passengers on both planes were later safely evacuated.  
  
Just after midnight, as all outbound flights were suspended and inbound flights diverted to other airports, there was a large explosion near Fokker Gate: the first militant had detonated his suicide vest.  
  
By now, dead and wounded were being ferried to the nearby Jinnah Hospital. Their numbers rose steadily through the night - by morning, the hospital would report 16 dead and dozens injured - as security forces intensified their counter-attack.  
  
As the fighting raged outside, seven employees from a cargo company took refuge in a warehouse - as it turned out, a fateful decision. They burned to death.  
  
Elsewhere, Hamid Khan, 22, a junior technician, hid with eight other men in the washroom of an aircraft maintenance company. A hand-grenade blew off part of the roof and bullets peppered a nearby container. "If anyone is inside, come out now!" shouted someone - friend or foe, Hamid couldn't tell.  
  
He and his colleagues kept silent and stayed put. "I was so afraid that I started reading my last prayers," he said, his voice still shaking with emotion days later.  
  
Two more militants would blow themselves up. By 4 a.m., all 10 were dead, their shattered bodies sprawled in pairs across the tarmac. It had taken 150 security personnel to counter them.  
  
The Rangers identified them as ethnic Uzbeks. Pakistani officials often accuse foreign militants of staging attacks alongside the Pakistani Taliban. "We admit we carried out this attack with the help of our other brotherly mujahideen groups," the senior member of the Pakistani Taliban told Reuters.  
  
A SECOND ATTACK  
  
In daylight, Pakistan's busiest airport resembled a war zone. Smoke billowed from gutted buildings. Rescue workers retrieved the seven cargo company employees, their corpses charred beyond recognition, and raised the death toll to 34.  
  
Junior technician Hamid Khan and the other eight emerged unscathed from their washroom refuge. "I felt as if God had heard our prayers," he said.  
  
At least three passenger aircraft, all unoccupied, were damaged during the battle, a senior Pakistani security official told Reuters. A satellite photo on Google Earth showed a fourth aircraft in the cargo area completely destroyed, its broken wings lying amid the blackened remains of its fuselage.  
  
However, officials have not confirmed the destruction of any aircraft.  
  
Even as flights resumed and the clean-up began, the Taliban struck the airport again. On Tuesday evening, gunmen on motorbikes opened fire on an ASF academy, although there were no casualties. There would be "many more such attacks" in future, Pakistani Taliban spokesman Shahidullah Shahid told Reuters.  
  
Adil Najam, dean of Boston University's Pardee School of Global Studies, agreed. Karachi was "not just another terrorist attack," he said. "It is among the latest skirmishes in what is now an actual war between the Pakistan Army and the Taliban. The war is on - and expect escalation."

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