**Sri Lanka cricket team attack echoes deadly Mumbai offensive**

Commando-style assault in Lahore bears hallmarks of Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists linked to India offensive that killed 170 people

The [attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/03/sri-lanka-cricket-shooting) in Pakistan's cultural capital, Lahore, bears all the hallmarks of the terrorists behind the [Mumbai offensive](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/mumbai-terror-attacks), the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Twelve men carrying machine guns leapt out of rickshaws, carrying rocket launchers and wearing backpacks. They proceeded to spray bullets into the cricketing convoy which was en route to the city's Gaddafi stadium.

It was an audacious commando-style attack and, like the tragedy in Mumbai, planned to cause bloody mayhem and grab headlines. Not since the Munich Olympics have athletes and sportspeople been specifically targeted.

"I want to say it's the same pattern, the same terrorists who attacked Mumbai," Salman Taseer, the governor of central Punjab province, told reporters at the site of the attack, ruling out Indian involvement.

"They are trained criminals. They were not common people. The kind of weaponry they had, the kind of arms they had, the way they attacked ... they were not common citizens, they were obviously trained."

There does not appear to be any immediate connection with Sri Lanka's war with the separatist Tamil Tigers in the island's north-east.

[Sri Lanka](http://www.theguardian.com/world/srilanka) had been the only international cricket team willing to tour Pakistan in the face of ongoing security concerns. The two countries have been brought closer through arms sales; Colombo turned to Pakistan for $80m (£57m) of small arms to use in its war against the Tamil Tigers after India refused to sell it weapons.

Lashkar-e-Taiba is a hardline Islamist organisation which began life in 1986 as a jihadi group aimed at bombing the Soviets out of Afghanistan.

Its success brought the group into the orbit of Pakistan's army, which armed and sheltered the outfit. These "freedom fighters" were redirected to target the Indian army in the disputed border region of Kashmir.

In the Himalayan region, Lashkar developed its trademark "fidayeen" suicide squads – small groups of heavily armed men who are prepared to die in attacks. Today's onslaught appeared to be carried out by just such a group of men.

Western intelligence agencies have warned that Lashkar has global ambitions. The US became alarmed when a Lashkar leader turned up in Baghdad in 2004. After the Mumbai attack, the computer belonging to Lashkar's communications chief revealed a document that listed more than 320 cities on a worldwide terror strike list.

Earlier this month, the outgoing CIA director, Michael Hayden, said Lashkar was among the top 10 security challenges in 2009. He told Fox News of a "troubling development": the morphing of different Islamist groups into one.

"[A] migration of Lashkar-e-Taiba to a merge point [with al-Qaida] is probably taking place," he said.

Although Pakistan's government has cracked down on Lashkar and arrested some of its leaders, the group continues to run hospitals, schools, seminaries, newspapers and charity organisations throughout [Pakistan](http://www.theguardian.com/world/pakistan).

A UN ban on Jamat-ud-Dawa, a charity front for Lashkar-e-Taiba, has done little to stop the group operating. Another Lashkar outfit is still run by former Pakistani army soldiers.

The pressure appears to have simply emboldened the group. Analysts point out that Jamat's weekly publication Ghazva had in December reportedly called the Mumbai attack, which claimed 170 lives, a "historic" victory for Muslims.

There are worrying signs that the scale of Lashkar's operation has been deliberately obscured – and its resources are shockingly large for a "non-state actor".

Amir Raza, a Pakistani scholar, estimates that more than 100,000 men from Punjab have trained at some point at Lashkar terrorist training camps.