**Warning of attacks on Sri Lanka cricket team was ignored**

Pakistani officials received specific warnings that militants were planning to ambush the Sri Lankan cricket squad, but they were unable to prevent today's deadly attack because of the country's spiralling political crisis, opposition MPs claimed tonight.

At least a dozen heavily armed gunmen remain at large after launching the commando-style assault on the Sri Lankan team, killing six policemen and two bystanders, and injuring seven players and officials. The driver of one of the buses in the team's convoy was also killed.

In scenes reminiscent of the terror attacks on Mumbai in November, the gunmen opened fire with AK-47s, grenades and a rocket-launcher, spraying the team's bus with bullets as it drove to the 60,000-seater Gaddafi stadium in Lahore. Television footage showed the assailants running through the streets, firing towards police lines.

Barack Obama said the United States was deeply concerned by what the US state department called a "vicious attack on innocent civilians".

The head of Pakistan's interior ministry, Rehman Malik, said the country was "in a state of war" and the authorities were investigating whether the attackers had intended to take hostages. "The way they came prepared and in large numbers indicates such a plan," he said.

But tonight attention was focusing on the apparently lax security arrangements, after a document emerged in the Pakistani media showing that local police had warned in writing of the possibility of the Sri Lankan team being targeted.

The letter, dated 22 January this year, from a member of the criminal investigation branch to the then provincial police chief, said he had "learnt" that an attack was planned on the Sri Lankan team, either at their hotel or between the hotel and the sports stadium.

Police and administration officials met on 23 January to assess the threat, but before action could be taken, the government of Punjab province – of which Lahore is the capital – run by the party of the former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, was dismissed, following a court ruling .

The federal government, led by Asif Zardari, then installed its own administration, and the upper ranks of the police and administration were replaced.

Opposition politicians accused the government of ignoring specific warnings. "Intelligence reports said there might be an attack on the cricket team," said Pervez Rashid, a senior member of the sacked Punjab government. "They made no appropriate security arrangements."

It appeared that no police had been deployed along the 5km route.

Sharif's brother, Shahbaz, said that if Zardari's replacement administration "had not spent all their time planning how to buy up enough MPs to form their own government in Punjab, this might never have happened".

Islamabad dismissed accusations of negligence. "It is disturbing that a major Pakistani political party would attempt to score cheap domestic points during such a serious incident," said a spokesperson for President Zardari. "This was the Pakistani police at their finest. Officers gave their lives."

The former cricketer and Pakistani politician Imran Khan told ITV News: "It's the government of Punjab which is responsible for this, because it is shocking – the sort of security they provided the Sri Lankan team after having given them guarantees that all the security concerns would be taken care of. A normal minister in [Pakistan](http://www.theguardian.com/world/pakistan) … would have got better security than was provided to the Sri Lankans."

Pakistan has come under sustained attack from jihadists from the Punjab province and the border region near Afghanistan since 2007. However, assaults have been mainly suicide and other bombings. The use of gunmen is a new tactic. Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Pakistani militant group believed to have carried out the Mumbai operation, has no history of attacks within Pakistan.