Pakistan Laments Cricket Matches Unplayed, and Blames Politics

Many see the pullouts by the England and New Zealand teams as punishment for the country's support of the Afghan Taliban.

By **Salman Masood**
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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — The English men's and women's cricket teams have abruptly canceled plans to play in Pakistan next month, the second international withdrawal for a country both obsessed with the sport and increasingly worried about its image on the world stage.

The withdrawal by the England Cricket Board on Monday came just three days after the New Zealand cricket team pulled out of plans to play in Pakistan for the first time since 2003. That team did so just minutes before the first game, citing an unspecified security threat. The English board, speaking even more vaguely, said it was responding to "concerns about traveling in the region."

"We are sincerely sorry for the impact this will have on cricket in Pakistan and emphasize an ongoing commitment to our main touring plans there for 2022," the England Cricket Board said in a statement on Monday.

The abrupt cancellation came as a major embarrassment and setback to Pakistan. Describing the country's interest in cricket as a "passion" could be an understatement. The national team won the sport's World Cup in 1992, beating England, and Imran Khan, the current prime minister, was captain of the team.

But the country has a troubled history with visiting teams, and renewed terror attacks in the country have also increased nervousness about visiting there. The country has also come under increased international scrutiny for its longtime relationship with the Taliban in Afghanistan, which fell to the group a month ago as U.S.-backed forces fled.

Foreign teams for years avoided Pakistan after a 2009 terror attack targeted the Sri Lankan cricket team in the eastern city of Lahore. The team members survived, but six policemen and two civilians were killed. Pakistan was then forced to play international cricket outside its borders for years.

Members of the Sri Lankan international cricket team boarding a rescue helicopter at a stadium in Lahore in 2009, after the team was targeted by a terror attack. Lee Austin/Getty Images

Against this backdrop, the New Zealand and England visits had been keenly awaited. Officials in Pakistan had hoped that they would be able to showcase the events as a testimony to the country's improved security situation and diplomatic standing.

In canceling the tour last week, the New Zealand team did not specify the exact nature of the security threat. But the country's prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, said New Zealand Cricket "made the right decision."

"You will understand why we are not in a position to give further information as to the nature of the intelligence, other than to say, it was a direct threat, and it was a credible threat," Ms. Ardern was quoted as saying Sunday.

Officials in Pakistan said they had not received a threat and asked their New Zealand counterparts for more information. A former spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban, or T.T.P., a banned terrorist group, said in a Facebook post before the scheduled New Zealand game that the team may have been targeted by a different group.

"As far as I know a global jihadi organization (IS) is looking for a big target in Pakistan," said Ehsanullah Ehsan, citing the Islamic State terrorist group. It was not clear whether Mr. Ehsan had knowledge of any planned attack, and his Facebook account was deleted shortly after.

The tour cancellations have been met with widespread anger and disappointment in Pakistan. "We were all very excited and looking forward to watch the match in the stadium," said Nawab Ahmed Alam, 41, who runs a cricket club in Islamabad, adding that he had bought a ticket to watch the first match between Pakistan and New Zealand. "But now with the tours called off, cricket fans feel that Pakistan has been taken back 10 years."

The cancellations are especially frustrating to locals because teams from other countries, like Bangladesh, Zimbabwe and South Africa, had begun visiting in 2015, raising hopes that things could return to normal.

"It's very unfortunate because the spectators and fans want to see their cricket heroes play in front of them, on the home soil against foreign teams," Mr. Alam said. "The thrill and enjoyment has been denied to the fans."

Pakistani officials have claimed that the country's security has vastly improved after a series of crackdowns against militant groups, particularly the Pakistani Taliban, which launched a bloody campaign of terrorist attacks from 2007 to 2014.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

But fears about the resurgence of the militant groups have surfaced once again after the Taliban takeover of neighboring Afghanistan. The Taliban groups in the two countries share ideological moorings and have a vast network of support from religious seminaries spread across Pakistan.

Members of the Afghan Taliban at the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, this month. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The Pakistani Taliban are also showing signs of making a slow comeback. They claimed 32 attacks in August alone, and earlier this month claimed responsibility for an ambush that left seven soldiers dead and several wounded. Government officials say that the recent attacks have been sporadic and limited to remote regions on the border with Afghanistan.

The militant group last week also rebuffed an amnesty offer by senior government officials and vowed that it would continue with its armed ways.

Many in Pakistan believe that the country is being punished for its support of the Afghan Taliban and the deterioration of Pakistan's ties with the United States and other European countries. Pakistan has called for an inclusive government in Afghanistan but has also urged the world to work with the Afghan Taliban, and the government has said its influence on its neighbor to the west is overstated.

Fawad Chaudhry, the Pakistani information minister, tweeted on Tuesday that "a certain international lobby is engaged against Pakistan, but those who want to bend us will never succeed." He added: "Get rid of this misconception soon."

Ramiz Raja, the chairman of the Pakistani cricket board, criticized what he called the "Western bloc" in a video statement.

But Muhammad Amir Rana, an Islamabad-based columnist and security analyst, said in an interview that Pakistan could not ignore the security threat posed by the militant groups. Pro-Taliban sentiment has increased in the country since the Afghan Taliban takeover, and statements by many public figures in support of the Taliban have, in fact, emboldened the terrorist groups, he noted.

"We need to put our own house in order first," he said, "to have improved relations with the world."