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Unending suicide attacks to pre-empt military offensive?

Reeling from one deadly suicide attack after another, each deadlier and more sophisticated than the previous, post-election Pakistan was supposed to have paved the way for a peaceful climate, with President Pervez Musharraf routed in the elections and the militant's political grievances addressed.

But experts fear the violence will not cease, at least in the near future. There are many who even see the attacks as a strategy to pre-empt a speculated military offensive.

The experts suggest that one solution for the new rulers would be to involve the religious scholars in condemning the suicide attacks as well as minimizing civilian casualties during military operations, which is igniting much hatred against the army and the rulers.

"It is unreasonable to assume that just because Pakistan had its elections and the army is retreating, suicide bombings should end," Adil Najam, a professor and director at the Frederick S. Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer Range Future, Boston University, told IANS.

Najam was referring to the unabated suicide attacks in the aftermath of the Feb 18 elections that brought in democratic forces, routing Musharraf's Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q).

"If anything, I think the logical sequence is that the attacks will increase in the short term, and that is the key point," warns Najam, because "terrorists thrive on chaos, on uncertainty", which according to him is "both their goal".

Najam could not have been more accurate.

The double suicide attack at the Naval War College, in Lahore March 4, was the fourth in five days. Within the week, a bomb attack in Mingora in restive Swat Valley killed a police officer. Fifty people were killed and scores injured the same evening at the police officer's funeral. This was followed by another deadly attack on a gathering (jirga) of tribal elders in Darra Adam Khel in northwest Pakistan, killing 42.

"It's Musharraf's political allies, not him, that have been routed in the recent elections," says Khurram Iqbal, a research analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

Iqbal says Musharraf, with strong army backing, still holds the power to oversee military operations against local Taliban militants.

With a decisive military operation in the tribal areas speculated in the upcoming days, Iqbal sees the recent spate of attacks "as a well thought strategy by the Taliban to pre-empt the military offensives".

Ayesha Siddiqa, security analyst, told iANS: "The terrorists are not looking for a political change or were never after getting rid of the Musharraf government. Their discourse for change is violence, not electoral politics."

While the attacks have become deadlier and sophisticated, what is befuddling is the shift in their targets.

Last year the targets were security forces and the army. Now these include civilians. The latest attack on the tribal gathering suggests the militants do not care to honour the tribal code.

The attacks have also exposed the limitations of the law enforcement agencies and the intelligence outfits in identifying or cracking down on them.

The wave of suicide bombings in Pakistan was a tactic that the homegrown breed of militants learnt from Iraqi and Afghan insurgents against foreign aggressors.

It began in 2002, in the aftermath of the US-led invasion on Iraq. It was clearly in retaliation to Pakistan fighting the proxy war for the US against terror.

These attacks reached alarming heights with 56 such incidents last year, killing security forces and civilians and bringing the death toll to almost 500.

Since the beginning of 2008, over a dozen such attacks have taken the death toll to 200 people.

For the rise in such violent attacks, analysts point fingers variously at the state and Pakistan's intelligence agencies that have long been known to nurture jihadi outfits since the 1980s.

To that of nurturers, Iqbal adds the US and Saudi Arabia "to fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan". After the Soviet Union disintegrated, Pakistan was left alone to face the jihadi culture, he said.

The increased number of suicide attacks on armed forces and ISI personnel, involving local Taliban and some of mainland militant groups, show that Pakistani intelligence has lost its control over these groups.

"You create a monster and then you live with the monster for a long time to come. Unfortunately, our future is full of monsters, with or without Musharraf," admits Najam.

The solution, as Najam sees, is not a "short-term fix" and needs a long-term strategy.

"The question is whether we have the sagacity to ride out the getting worse part without losing our cool."

"In order to combat this menace we have to remove the conditions in which someone can be convinced to blow himself up for a cause - any cause. This change does not happen overnight," suggests Najam.

Iqbal is of the view that the role of religious scholars cannot be undermined. "They should come forward to condemn it," adding: "Above all, collateral damage during military operations must be minimized."

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