

## **Suicide Attack on Pakistan Air Force Bus in Sargodha (Punjab)**

### The Incident

On Thursday, 1<sup>st</sup> November 2007 (6:45 am PST), a Pakistan Air Force (PAF) Hino bus bearing number plate 31321 was taking Pakistan Air Force officers and trainees to a nearby training centre. When it reached a small bridge on the highway, a suicide bomber riding a motorcycle (Number KFC 1551) struck it from the front.<sup>1</sup> According to eye witnesses, the suicide attacker was roaming the area since early morning.<sup>2</sup> The PAF base, Mushaf Airbase, is located in Sargodha (District of Punjab), about 200 kilometres (125 miles) south of Pakistan's capital, Islamabad.

### Attack Analysis

Security experts opined that the attack is the reprisal for the air strikes made by the PAF in the Mir Ali area of North Waziristan between October 6 and 9, 2007, in which a large number of civilians were allegedly killed. Pro-Taliban militants from the area are suspected to be behind the suicide attack. On the Mushaf Airbase in Sargodha, from which the F-16 aircraft which made the air strikes in the Mir Ali area had taken off. It is pertinent to mention that terrorists had previously committed a suicide attack against a police training school in Sargodha on 3 August 2007. However, the suicide bomber could not get into the training school and detonated himself on the entrance gate, killing a police officer was killed and one security guard was injured.<sup>3</sup> The said suicide attack took place soon after the Pakistani government conducted a counter-terrorism operation against the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque). Subsequent suicide attacks throughout Pakistan were linked by investigators to the renewed fighting between Pakistani security forces and local Taliban militants in North and South Waziristan as well as a reaction to the siege and the ultimate storming of the Lal Masjid in July 2007.<sup>4</sup>

The second deadly suicide attack on Mushaf Airbase struck at a time when Pakistani security forces are engaged in curbing and eliminating pro-Taliban militants in Malakand Agency. Heavy military operations are underway in the Swat region of Malakand Agency, which is a stronghold of Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM) - (Movement for the Implementation of Mohammedan Laws) led by Maulana Fazlullah alias Maulana Radio. The government has claimed to have killed hundreds of pro-Taliban militants during the military operations, using both infantry and helicopter gunships.

In recent months, the local Taliban militants have attempted to attack Air Force bases in reaction to their bombing raids against them. Previously, the Taliban militants have also attempted to target the Peshawar airport, which is a dual-purpose airport, used by both civilian and military. Most of the helicopters gunships engaged in military operations against Taliban strongholds and hidouts in North and South Waziristan Agencies, as well

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<sup>1</sup> Daily Tawar (Urdu), Mastaung, 2 November 2007

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> "Suicide Attack on Police School Foiled", Dawn, 3 August 2007

<sup>4</sup> "Policeman, militant die in failed suicide attack in Sargodha", Daily Times, 03 August 2007

as in Malakand, operate from the Peshawar airport. On 28 October 2007, local police foiled a rocket attack targeting the Peshawar airport by defusing rockets installed in the suburb of Peshawar city.<sup>5</sup> Earlier, on 9 August 2007, police had foiled a missile attack on the airport by defusing the missiles, which had been placed on the bed of the Bara River near the Bazidkhel village.

Apart from targeting the Peshawar airport, a vehicle of PAF carrying air force personnel were targeted with a bomb blast on the Kohat road on 6 August 2007, which injured three persons including two PAF personnel.<sup>6</sup>

The militants could have targeted Sargodha airbase due to the fact that Peshawar airbase is highly protected due to the militancy issue in the region. Sargodha had less security as the base is located in the middle of the country, and was viewed as a out of reach of the militants.

It is suspected that the local Taliban could be behind the suicide attack on the PAF bus in Sargodha. The local Taliban in North and South Waziristan Agencies have established a nexus with Al Qaeda and with some Pakistani outlawed groups, like Lakshar-e-Jhangvi (LJ), a hardline Sunni sectarian outfit; Jamiatul Furqan (A break away fraction of banned Jaish-e-Muhammad); Harkatul Mujahideen (HuM); and Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami (HUJI). The main recruiting and training ground for the suicide bombings is the North and South Waziristan, where the fresh tribal recruits are being indoctrinated by Al Qaeda and other Pakistani outlawed groups.

According to Pakistani officials, these militant outfits have operational partnership with Al-Qaeda and Taliban, and are receiving financial backing from Al Qaeda. There are also reports that the militants from these terrorist entities have taken sanctuary in South Waziristan, where they are being distinguished as “Punjabi Taliban.” Sargodha is located adjacent to Jhang city, which is the stronghold of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Similarly, one of the most notorious LJ leaders, Riaz Basra, also lived in Sargodha, and carried out various sectarian operations in the city. There are strong indications that the attack could have been the mastermind of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, who could have used a Taliban recruit as a suicide bomber.

Following the suicide attack on Sargodha, the local police launched a massive crackdown against banned jihadi organisations in Sargodha. Numerous activists of the defunct organisations were arrested and shifted to an unknown place for interrogations. Investigations are still underway.<sup>7</sup>

#### Pictures from the Suicide Attack Site

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<sup>5</sup> “Plot to Attack Peshawar Airport Foiled”, *Dawn*, 29 October 2007

<sup>6</sup> “Blast Injures 3 PAF Officials”, *Daily Times*, 7 August 2007

<sup>7</sup> “Crackdown on defunct jihadi organizations underway” *Daily Times*, 03 November 2007



Location of Sargodha<sup>8</sup>



سرگودھا، آنتیش کار خود کش حملے میں تباہ ہونے والی پاک فضائیہ کی بس کا معائنہ کر رہے ہیں

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<sup>8</sup> The News, 02 November 2007