

ISAS Brief

No. 99 – Date: 4 March 2009

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Attack on Sri Lanka's Cricket Team: Is Pakistan in Total Chaos and Anarchy?

Ishtiaq Ahmed¹

The unthinkable has happened! On 3 March 2009, 12 gunmen sprayed bullets and threw grenades and bombs with rocket launchers on the bus carrying the Sri Lankan cricket team which was touring Pakistan. The team was on its way to the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore for the ongoing test match with Pakistan. Since the target was a fast-moving one, not all the deadly ammunition hit the target. Eight Sri Lankan players were injured, none critically, while five Pakistani security personnel died defending them. Two other Pakistanis are also reported killed in the attack.

In a very rude and shocking way, the dastardly assault bore the hallmarks of the attacks in Mumbai in November last year. One could see on television the terrorists moving around with great ease and confidence, shooting at will and showing no signs of nervousness or hurry. Not surprisingly, a senior minister in the Punjab Cabinet, Raja Riaz, unequivocally drew parallels between the attack and the Mumbai outrage, alleging that the same forces were involved in the Lahore attack.

There is little doubt that the whole operation had been planned in minute detail and the men drafted into its execution had been thoroughly brainwashed not to waiver in their resolve to kill. Mercy, compassion and simple human decency seemed to have been effectively extricated from their mental make-up. They seemed to relish their killing spree. Among their motives or intentions, one must have been to prove that they can strike terror anywhere and anytime.

Several other cricket teams, including those from Australia and India, had refused to play in Pakistan for fear of possible terrorist attacks. Only Sri Lanka agreed to send a team. Those who planned and executed the attacks were more than hell-bent on punishing them for showing solidarity with Pakistan. This is the inevitable inference one must draw because there cannot be any other reason for attacking the Sri Lankans.

Who are the perpetrators of this crime? The Sri Lankan government has overruled a revenge attack by the Tamil Tigers. The Pakistani media have circulated a theory that a foreign hand was involved in the attack and the allusion is towards India. There is no doubt that all types

¹ Professor Ishtiaq Ahmed is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isasia@nus.edu.sg.

of conspiracy theories will now flourish and the complicity of India's Research and Analysis Wing, the Mossad of Israel and the American Central Intelligence Agency being individually or collectively behind the conspiracy to attack the Sri Lankan cricketers will be pedalled. However, this time round, it was truly homegrown terrorism. The calm and composed manner in which the attack was carried out and the ease with which the attackers disappeared from the scene point to the culprits being rooted in the soil.

Given the brazen nature of the attack amidst tight security by the Pakistan government for the Sri Lankan cricket team, it would be perfectly legitimate to argue that the civilian government, the police force, the Criminal Investigation Department or even the military has little or no control over what is happening in the country. The attackers had scant regard for the security forces when launching the attack.

Given the similarities with the attacks in Mumbai, it would be reasonable to argue that the same team comprising cadres of the Pakistan Taliban, Al Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Toiba, Jaish-e-Muhammad and other such organisations coordinated their efforts to carry out the attack. Rouge elements in the Inter-Services Intelligence and the military may have provided intelligence. Such an operation requires being one up on the government.

The current political crisis and impasse in the Punjab probably served as an extra incentive to attack just now. Last week, the government of the majority party in the Punjab, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, fell because Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif was declared illegible to hold public office by a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court. He was presumably declared party to the decision taken by his elder brother, Nawaz Sharif, not to let a Pakistan International Airlines flight carrying General Pervez Musharraf land in Pakistan in October 1999 when the latter returned from Colombo. It endangered the lives of hundreds of people who were on board that aircraft. The full verdict has not been released yet. President Asif Ali Zardari imposed Governor's rule in the Punjab.

In the absence of a functioning government, it is very likely that the routine gathering, collation and provision of intelligence to the head of government in Pakistan's key province was disrupted. Of course Salman Taseer continued to hold the office of the Punjab's Governor. However, with the Chief Minister sent home some days before the attack, the lapse that must have occurred in the Punjab's continual governance and administration played into the hands of the terrorists.

The second question is why attack the cricket team of a country that has traditionally enjoyed friendly relations with Pakistan. Moreover, the Sri Lankan Muslim minority is better protected in the Sinhalese regions of Sri Lanka than where the Tamil Tigers once held sway. The most obvious explanation is that the Sri Lankans were literally within reach and that factor alone may have sufficed to qualify them as a target. Terrorists are after all pragmatists and an opportunity on home ground must have been very tempting.

One can even think of an obsessive ideological concern with making Pakistan adhere to a strict Islamic code of life as the motivation for the attack. Cricket is most certainly a game Pakistanis have learnt to love because of their colonial contact with the English. From a twisted theological point of view, cricket may be considered an 'un-Islamic sport' which creates stars and heroes that fans adore and worship. For hardcore Islamists, that is tantamount to idolatry and, therefore, punishable in the harshest of ways. After all, it was the

Taliban who destroyed the more-than-1,500-year-old statues of Buddha at Bamiyan in Afghanistan and there was no other reason except a rabidly fanatical opposition to idols.

It is a sad day for Pakistani cricket lovers because there is no other sport that touches the emotions of Pakistanis so deeply as cricket. Lahore will never be the same again. The future of Pakistan as a great cricketing nation has been put into jeopardy. It would be very difficult to convince foreign teams to visit and play in Pakistan. More significantly, Pakistan's reputation as a failed state, as the epicentre of terrorism and as a society dissipating under the weight of corruption and fanaticism will only be reinforced by the attack. Pakistan may even be considered a 'pariah' nation.

Under the current circumstances, there is only one option available now for Pakistan. Its ruling elite, comprising the elected members of parliament, the bureaucracy and the military, must develop a consensus to fight terrorism with all the resources at its disposal. It would also make good sense and wisdom to join hands with India and Afghanistan, and develop a regional policy of zero tolerance towards extremism and terrorism. Only then perhaps Pakistan would be able to achieve some degree of success in combating the terrorists. Otherwise, the country will sink into total chaos and anarchy. It will then truly become a failed state.

oooOOOooo