

CRICKET TEAM ATTACKED IN LAHORE

Signs of anarchy in Pakistan?

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THE unthinkable has happened. On Tuesday, up to 12 gunmen sprayed bullets and threw grenades and bombs at a bus carrying the Sri Lankan cricket team. The team was on its way to the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore for the ongoing test match with Pakistan. Six Sri Lankan players and two officials were injured, none critically, while six Pakistani security personnel died defending them. One other Pakistani was killed in the attack.

The dastardly assault bore the hallmarks of the Mumbai attacks last November. One could see on television the terrorists moving around with great ease and confidence, shooting at will and showing no signs of nervousness. Not surprisingly, Pakistani officials drew parallels between the Lahore and Mumbai attacks, alleging that the same forces were involved in both.

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 probably hell-bent on punishing the Sri Lankans 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 ruled out a revenge attack by the Tamil Tigers. The Pakistani media has circulated the theory that a "foreign hand" was involved, an allusion perhaps to India.

There is no doubt that all types of conspiracy theories will now flourish - and India's Research and Analysis Wing, Israel's Mossad and the United States' Central Intelligence Agency will figure prominently in the tales. However, this time round, it was truly home-grown terrorism. The calm and composed manner in which the attackers behaved and the ease with which they disappeared from the scene indicate they were indigenous.

Given the brazen nature of the attack amid the tight security that the Pakistan government had provided for the Sri Lankan cricket team, it would be legitimate to wonder how much control the Pakistani government, the police force, the Criminal Investigation Department or even the military have over what is happening in the country.

And given the similarities of the Lahore operation with the Mumbai attack, it would be legitimate to ask if the same groups - the Pakistan Taleban, Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed and other such organisations - were not involved in both attacks.

The current political crisis in the Punjab province probably served as an extra incentive to attack just now.

Last week, the government of the majority party in the province, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, fell because then-chief minister Shahbaz Sharif was declared ineligible to hold public office by a three-judge panel of the Supreme Court. Presumably, he was deemed to have been party to the decision by his elder brother, former Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif, not to let a Pakistan International Airlines flight carrying General Pervez Musharraf land in Pakistan in October 1999 when the latter was returning from Colombo. The full verdict has not been released yet. President Asif Ali Zardari imposed the 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. With the chief minister having been sent home some days before the attack, the lapse that occurred in the province's administration must have played into the hands of the terrorists.

The second question is why the cricket team of a country that has traditionally enjoyed friendly relations with Pakistan was attacked. Indeed, Sri Lanka's Muslim minority is better protected in the Sinhalese regions of Sri Lanka than in the areas where the Tamil Tigers once held sway.

One explanation is that the Sri Lankans were literally within reach and that factor alone may have sufficed to qualify them as targets. Terrorists are above all opportunists and an opportunity on home ground had presented itself.

An obsessive concern with strict Islamic code may have been another motive 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 point of view, therefore, cricket may be considered an "un-Islamic sport". Moreover, it creates stars whom fans adore and worship. For hardcore Islamists, that is tantamount to idolatry and, therefore, punishable. The Taleban destroyed the 1,500-year-old statues of Buddha at Bamiyan in Afghanistan, for no other reason than a rabidly fanatical opposition to idols.

The attack was felt as a tragedy for Pakistan's cricket lovers. There is no other sport that touches the emotions of Pakistanis as deeply as does cricket. 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.

Under the current circumstances, there is only one option open to Pakistan. Its ruling elite - the elected politicians, the bureaucracy and the military - must develop a consensus to fight terrorism with all the resources at their disposal. They should join hands with India and Afghanistan to fight terrorists. Only then perhaps would Pakistan be able to achieve some degree of success in combating terrorists. Otherwise, the country will sink into total chaos and anarchy.

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Pakistani demonstrators condemning the attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore. The calm and composed manner in which the attackers behaved and the ease with which they disappeared from the scene indicate they were indigenous. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

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