

Taliban Truce and the Coming Storm in South Asia

by Tom Burghardt via rialator - Antifascist Calling... *Sunday, Mar 8 2009, 8:59am*

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With growing instability and political turmoil inside Afghanistan and Pakistan, due in no small measure to American efforts on both sides of the "Afpak" divide to "stabilize" the region for multinational energy companies, this spring will see the rise of combat operations inside both countries.

Pakistan is already feeling the heat generated by the imperialist Dracula and the jihadi Frankenstein.

Despite promises that the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) would lay down their arms once the Army ceased operations in Swat Valley, the state's capitulatory compact has instead provided militants with an excuse to exact vengeance on their opponents whilst establishing new training camps for pressed-ganged "recruits."

Call it Pakistan's "Year Zero" when "everything changed." Not that the Americans, the state or the corporate grifters who preside over IMF-dictated privatization schemes and debt payments to foreign banks give a hoot.

The New York Times [reported](#) March 6, that just days after the truce was signed "a member of a prominent anti-Taliban family returned to his mountain village, having received assurances from the government that it was safe. He was promptly kidnapped by the Taliban, tortured and murdered."

Pir Samiullah, a moderate religious leader who took up arms against the Taliban--it should be noted against "advice" by the Army--organized a local militia that fought the TTP and booted the miscreants from their mountain village. His cousin told the *Times*, that after his abduction the man was held for five days before his body was dumped February 25. "There was no skin on his back," he said. "We had advised him, 'You shouldn't go, you shouldn't trust.'"

On the ground, the situation for women is immeasurably worse. *Dawn* [reported](#) March 7: "Terrified, locked up at home and courting death if they go out alone, women oppressed by extremists in Swat have nothing to celebrate on International Women's Day."

Which is precisely the regime the purveyors of religious obscurantism and murderous sectarianism intend to impose throughout Pakistan, with or without blessings from Washington. After all, what better means to facilitate the drug trade or other illicit activities controlled, or "taxed," by TPP "emirs" chauffeured about in up-scale Land Rovers or Mercedes!

With death threats against "immoral" women proliferating like flies around a corpse, the prospects for education, health care, or even the simple pleasures of going shopping with friends have all but evaporated. One ninth grade pupil told *Dawn*, "My mother told me I can do anything, but my inner soul is shattered."

And with a recently concluded 17-point "peace" agreement with the TTP, the state and nominally

"secular" parties such as the bourgeois Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and Awami National League (ANL)--which trounced the fundamentalist Army clone, Jamaat-i-Islami party in last year's national elections--has agreed to close shops, ban music, "obscene" videos and in general, make life a living hell.

As the state's writ continues to contract in the face of the Taliban offensive, women, workers, religious minorities are under attack. On Thursday, a bomb partially destroyed the mausoleum of the 17th century Sufi poet Rahman Baba, in NWFP's provincial capital Peshawar. Why? Because "women were coming to pray there," according to the [Los Angeles Times](#).

I. A. Rahman, the director of Pakistan's independent Human Rights Commission told the *L. A. Times*, "They've given them a yard and now they're taking 2 kilometers."

Needless to say, the majority of Swat residents are terrified of TTP armed thugs and have voted on the compact with their feet, refusing to trek back to their homes, exiles in their own country. The prospects of ever returning to a semblance of a "normal" life are grim, particularly after TTP "emirs" announced in a local mosque "that every family in the village would have to contribute one young man to their ranks, according to the *The New York Times*. Some "peace."

Mullah Omar Enters the Frame

While corporate media have focused on last month's truce in Swat Valley, signed-off by the Zardari regime and the Army with the TTP's sociopathic "emir" Maulana Fazlullah, little mention has been made of the strategically far more critical agreement hammered out by Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar.

That pact, forged between the TTP and their on-again, off-again allies in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) will have far-reaching ramifications for both nations.

While the Obama administration plans to deploy 17,000 additional American troops between now and May in Afghanistan, with additional deployments possibly numbering 30,000 by years' end, Washington is desperate to wrest control of large swathes of territory controlled by the Taliban and the TTP. It would appear however, that Omar has other plans.

On February 21, *The News* [reported](#) that "three prominent Pakistani militant commanders ... on Friday set aside their differences and promised to jointly fight their enemy in future." A "senior militant commander" said that Pakistani and Afghan Taliban leaders,

had played a role in resolving differences among the three militant commanders. He said a 14-member Shura was formed after their final meeting that would comprise banned Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) chief Baitullah Mehsud, Hafiz Gul Bahadur, Taliban commander in North Waziristan and Maulvi Nazeer, militant commander in South Waziristan. (Mushtaq Yusufzai, "Top militant commanders resolve rift," *The News*, February 21, 2009)

In a further sign that stepped-up attacks are in the offing, Mullah Omar and the "emir" of the

Afghan-Arab database of disposable Western intelligence assets, Osama bin Laden, demanded that allied jihadi outfits in North and South Waziristan "immediately stop their attacks on the Pakistani security forces," *The News* [reported](#) February 24.

According to the Lahore-based newspaper, Omar first sent an envoy and then wrote a letter to the TTP's leadership council led by Mehsud, admonishing the group for attacks on their "Muslim brethren."

He told them that if they really want to participate in Jihad, they must fight the US and Nato troops inside Afghanistan because their attacks on the Pakistani security forces are undermining the objectives of the war against the invaders and cause of the Taliban movement.

"If anybody really wants to wage Jihad, he must fight the occupation forces inside Afghanistan," the source quoted Mullah Omar as having told the TTP leaders. "Attacks on the Pakistani security forces and killing of fellow Muslims by the militants in the tribal areas and elsewhere in Pakistan is bringing a bad name to Mujahideen and harming the war against the US and Nato forces in Afghanistan." (Mazhar Tufail, "Mullah Omar orders halts to attacks on Pak troops," *The News*, February 24, 2009)

The elusive Taliban leader, a protégé of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence agency (ISI), was groomed by leading circles within the Army's military and intelligence bureaucracy to seize the initiative in the 1990s, and bring an end to the chaos stoked by internecine fighting amongst former mujahedin chieftains squabbling over the spoils of that destroyed nation.

By 1996, when the Taliban swept out of Pakistan's NWFP and seized Kabul, providing what Pakistan's elite (including the Bhutto and Sharif families) believed would be "strategic depth" vis-à-vis imperialist arch-rival India, the move was applauded by the Clinton administration and the multinational petroleum giants whom they served. It would appear that Omar is reprising that role today.

The Guardian [reported](#) March 3 that as a result of February talks, the warring factions that previously fought over lucrative smuggling routes have launched a new organization, the Shura Ittihad-ul-Mujahideen (Council of United Holy Warriors, SIM).

According to *Daily Times*, SIM issued a pamphlet late last month vowing to target the militant groups three enemies: "Obama, Zardari and Karzai". While Mehsud and the others have promised to stop attacking the Army, *Daily Times* points out that "the announcement of 'Zardari' as a target while letting the Pakistan army off the hook is a menacing signal for Pakistani politics."

Pakistan is already under heavy pressure by the United States to crack down on the host of jihadi groups threatening to spread the TTP's writ outside the tribal areas into major population centers. This will prove a daunting task considering that many alleged "holy warriors" are creatures of the ISI and organized crime-linked outfits who profit from the heroin trade, illegal logging, as well as lucrative extortion and kidnapping rackets.

In this context, Omar's demand that jihadists cease attacks on Pakistani security and police and concentrate their fire instead on American and NATO forces in Afghanistan, may represent

maneuvers within ISI and the Army to pressurize the weak Zardari administration into doing their bidding, i.e. supporting the return of a fundamentalist Afghan government that would provide Pakistan with its ever-elusive "strategic depth." This was hammered home by Omar:

"Our aim is to liberate Afghanistan from the occupation forces and death and destruction inside neighbouring Pakistan has never been our goal," he added. The source said according to Mullah Omar, the US was devising a new strategy and adopting new tactics to crush Mujahideen in Afghanistan so the Taliban, too, must forge unity in their ranks, and instead of operating in Pakistan, they must concentrate on actions against the US and Nato forces. (*The News*, *ibid.*)

The United States, ever-eager then as now, to secure oil and gas pipelines across Afghanistan for U.S. energy companies once courted the fundamentalists. Despite the upcoming "surge," America may do so once again if dictated by ubiquitous "facts on the ground."

On February 20, the *Canadian Broadcasting Company* [reported](#) that U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, a Bush holdover, said that the U.S. would be willing to accept a similar deal in Afghanistan if the Swat pact succeeded.

Gates, speaking at last month's NATO conference in Krakow, Poland said: "If there is a reconciliation, if insurgents are willing to put down their arms, if the reconciliation is essentially on the terms being offered by the government, then I think we would be very open to that. We have said all along that ultimately some sort of political reconciliation has to be part of the long-term solution in Afghanistan."

How would such a "reconciliation" play itself out?

Al Jazeera [reported](#) February 27, that "secret negotiations are under way to bring troops fighting alongside the Taliban into Afghanistan's political process." Negotiations between "Taliban-linked mediators, Western officials and the Afghan government," might see the return of none other than Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the narcotrafficking leader of the ISI and CIA's favorite gang during the anti-Soviet jihad, Hezb-i-Islami.

Believed to be directing attacks against NATO and American forces from northwest Pakistan, Hekmatyar "would first be offered asylum in Saudi Arabia, under the proposal being backed by the British government." Indeed, *Al Jazeera* reveals the talks have progressed to the point that

Ghairat Baheer, one of Hekmatyar's two son-in-laws released from the US prison at Bagram airbase in Afghanistan in May last year after six years in custody, is involved in the process, according to reports.

Baheer, an ambassador to Pakistan in the 1990s, was given a visa to travel to London by British authorities last month.

Humayun Jarir, a Kabul-based politician and son-in-law of Hekmatyar, is also said to have been involved. ("Secret talks with Taliban under way," *Al Jazeera*, February 27,

2009)

This is rich though unsurprising, given the Americans' love affair with a man once described as the world's most powerful drug trafficker. And considering alleged ties between President Hamid Karzai's brother, Ahmed Wali and the heroin trade, perhaps a deal with Hekmatyar isn't as crazy as it seems at first blush.

According to [The New York Times](#), "several American investigators said senior officials at the D.E.A. and the office of the Director of National Intelligence complained to them that the White House favored a hands-off approach toward Ahmed Wali Karzai because of the political delicacy of the matter."

So, if Hekmatyar is ready to come on-board and kick his al-Qaeda pals to the curb--as the U.S. is preparing to do with former "best friend forever" Hamid Karzai--why not let bygones be bygones? Stranger things have happened.

Whose Hand Is Behind the Lahore "Cricket" Attacks?

Inside Pakistan however, it appears some militants haven't gotten Omar's memo. On March 3, 12 heavily-armed gunmen staged a brazen attack in Lahore, Punjab's capital and Pakistan's second largest city.

While the bare facts are known, the question of who the perpetrators are--and from a parapolitical perspective, who controlled them--remains as of this writing a mystery. There are however, any number of likely suspects. To recapitulate Tuesday's events:

A convoy transporting Sri Lanka's national cricket team to a Test match against Pakistan's cricketers was ambushed by AK-47 toting terrorists who fired rockets and grenades at the entourage, killing six policemen as well as the driver of another van. 20 people were wounded including six of the athletes, two of whom remain hospitalized with bullet wounds.

Dawn [reports](#) that all of the attackers escaped and that police reinforcements from a nearby police station "only a couple of minute's walk" from Qaddafi Stadium, arrived only after the gunmen had fled. Large quantities of hand grenades, rockets launchers, AK-47s, suicide jackets, plastic explosives, pistols and walkie-talkies were recovered near the scene of the attack. The paper avers,

The large arms cache indicated that the attackers were prepared to hold out law enforcers for a longer period and raised suspicion that it might actually have been an attempt to hijack the bus carrying the Lankan cricketers.

If the ambush, however bloody, was all that the attackers were looking for they did not need to burden themselves with all the weapons they were carrying. Even though the police later on displayed the large seizure of the weapons, they refused to comment on the possibility of it being an attempt at kidnapping. (Muhammad Faisal Ali, "Sri Lankan team narrowly escape terror attack," *Dawn*, March 3, 2009)

Television images of backpack-toting assailants firing at the convoy bore striking similarities to last November's Mumbai terror attacks by Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET) militants, aided and abetted by Dawood Ibrahim's ISI-linked organized crime gang.

Indeed, on February 26, *The Guardian* [reported](#) that India named a high-ranking Pakistani Army officer, Colonel Sadatullah attached to the Special Communications Organization (SCO, Pakistan's NSA), implicating him in last November's assault. Citing an 11,509-page charge sheet filed by Mumbai police, investigators claim that "a total of 284 calls totalling 995 minutes were made to Pakistani handlers by the terrorists using mobile phones from the Taj Mahal hotel, Oberoi-Trident and Nariman House, a Jewish centre."

While the origin and the motives of the Lahore attackers remain a mystery, Taliban and al-Qaeda sympathizer, Lieutenant General Hamid Gul, a retired ISI chief, was quick to blame India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) for the attacks. Gul said on Pakistani television according to [IPS](#) that "India wants to declare Pakistan a terrorist state" and that the Lahore assault "is related to that conspiracy."

Similar charges were made, though more circumspectly, by Rehman Malik, the Prime Minister's Interior adviser, who claimed that the LET had "no links" to the attacks. He did however, manage to imply according to [Dawn](#), that "the involvement of foreign hands in the incident cannot be ruled out." However, *Asia Times* [reports](#),

Rather, judging by what was shown on Pakistani television, the attack is the hallmark of those that were waged by militants (many of them Punjabi) against Indian security forces in Indian-administered Kashmir up until a few years ago. They were trained by the Indian cell of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

In 2005-06, these militants joined forces with the Pakistani Taliban and the Afghan resistance after Pakistan closed down their training camps in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, a move that changed the dynamics of the war theater in the region. (Syed Saleem Shahzad, "'Cricket' attack marks a shift in Pakistan," *Asia Times Online*, March 4, 2009)

And considering the uncanny similarities to other recent attacks, *The Independent* [avers](#),

The numerous failings fuelled speculation that the attack might have been, at least in part, an "inside job". In previous terror attacks in Pakistan, the perpetrators appeared to have considerable intelligence about their targets. Car bombers have struck at army and anti-terror police headquarters in the past two years without the slightest hindrance. (Omar Waraich, "Suspicious grow that attack was an 'inside job'," *The Independent*, March 5, 2009)

Stressing the close interconnections amongst Pakistan's security services, organized crime outfits and the shadowy networks of allied jihadi groups, security analyst Robert Emerson told [The](#)

[Independent](#), "There are various elements within the Pakistani military and intelligence set-up who appear to have special relationships with militant groups. There are also links between political and criminal organisations. It is a complex and shadowy world with conflicting agendas."

Lashkar also has connections to the murky world of Pakistani cricket. Dawood Ibrahim, a Muslim gangster boss in Mumbai, is believed to have been responsible for organising a series of bombings at the Indian city in 1993, killing 250 people, after which he fled the country for Pakistan. Ibrahim, named by the US State Department as a "global terrorist with links to al-Qa'ida and Lashkar-e-Taiba", and a major trafficker of Afghan opium, has also been accused of playing a part in the last Mumbai attack.

Victor Ivanov, the head of the Russian counter-narcotics service, said: "Evidence suggests that the regional drug baron Dawood Ibrahim had provided his logistics network to prepare and carry out the Mumbai terror attacks." (Kim Sengupta, "Strike had hallmarks of Mumbai massacre," *The Independent*, March 4, 2009)

What is not mentioned however, is that Ibrahim's D-Company enjoyed historical ties with the American CIA and was an asset who assisted Washington's arms smuggling to Afghan "holy warriors" during the anti-Soviet jihad. After the CIA's favorite criminal financial institution, the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) went belly-up in the early 1990s, Dawood took over "management" of the port of Karachi from BCCI's "Black Network" of enforcers and assassins.

As I [reported](#) in mid-December, D-Company enjoys protected status afforded by the ISI and that Ibrahim's extensive smuggling networks along the Indian coast were in all probability used to infiltrate LET thugs into Mumbai.

Asia Times investigative journalist Raja Murthy was [told](#) by Lahore-based journalist Amir Mir that "Dawood's underworld connects and business ventures are extensive. And he sublets his name in Pakistan, Thailand, South Africa, Indonesia, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates, among other countries, to franchises in the fields of drug trafficking and gambling dens."

With contacts amongst serving and retired ISI officers, LET, other jihadi outfits and the near boundless riches afforded by his drug trafficking, smuggling and gambling empire, one cannot discount Dawood's hand as a "plausibly deniable" asset capable of providing the Lahore attackers with intelligence, arms and the means to escape the area after Tuesday's brazen assault.

Other analysts suggest that Tuesday's attack was carried out to free LET and other militant leaders arrested in the wake of the Mumbai atrocities. Investigative journalist Amir Mir [writes](#) that authorities "are trying to ascertain whether it was an attempt by the Lashkar-e-Taiba militants to hijack the bus carrying the team and to bargain the release of their chief operational commander Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi."

Lakhvi is currently detained in a Rawalpindi jail for his alleged role in the Mumbai attacks. Mir reports,

The authorities say the Lashkar militants involved in the Lahore assault might have in

their mind the successful hijacking of an Indian passenger aircraft in 2000, which eventually compelled the BJP government in India to release Maulana Masood Azhar, the chief of the Jaish-e-Mohammad who had been serving term in an Indian jail on terrorism charges. (Amir Mir, "Was attack on Sri Lankan team a bid to release Lakhvi?", *The News*, March 5, 2009)

In December 1999, Indian Airlines flight 814 was hijacked and flown to Afghanistan where 155 passengers were held hostage for eight days. In return for the release of three militants incarcerated in Indian prisons, the hostages were finally freed although one passenger was brutally murdered by the assailants.

In addition to JEM leader Azhar, Omar Saeed Sheikh, a reputed ISI-MI6 asset was also freed. Sheikh, currently under a death sentence in Pakistan for the 2002 murder of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, was a former student at the London School of Economics. In the early 1990s, he joined Harkat ul-Ansar (Movement of Supporters of the Faith, HUA) and fought in Bosnia in support of U.S.-NATO destabilization operations against the former Yugoslavia.

But as with the multitude of shadowy jihadi factions operating in Pakistan, JEM and HUA were creatures of the ISI and the Army. Indeed, *The History Commons* [reports](#) that HUA was "a Pakistani militant group originally formed and developed in large part due to Pervez Musharraf in the early 1990s." After their release, Azhar and Sheikh both returned to Pakistan, received a hero's welcome and toured the country "for weeks under the protection of the ISI."

Shortly before the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, it is alleged that Sheikh, an ISI asset and al-Qaeda operative wired \$100,000 to lead hijacker Mohamed Atta. Some versions hold that Sheikh did so with express authorization by ISI chieftain Mahmoud Ahmad. *The History Commons* avers,

In 2001, the flight's captain, Devi Sharan, will say that the hijackers of his plane used techniques similar to the 9/11 hijackers, suggesting a common modus operandi. The hijackers praised Osama bin Laden, had knives and slit the throat of a passenger, herded the passengers to the back of the plane where some of them used cell phones to call relatives, and one hijacker said he had trained on a simulator. ("Profile: Maulana Masood Azhar," *The History Commons*, no date.)

All of which begs the question: If the Lahore commando which attacked the Sri Lankan cricketers employed an operational script similar to Mumbai's, and are connected to LET or other militants yet unknown, what role did ISI, retired officers or other elements of Pakistan's deep state, including organized crime assets play in the terrorist atrocity?

Just as importantly, with the obvious motive of destabilizing the country and sowing chaos, it cannot be ruled out that the United States will seize on the attack and the Swat compact with the TTP, to pressure the Army's General Headquarters in Rawalpindi, and particularly Chief of Staff General Asfaq Parvez Kayani, newly returned from "comprehensive multilateral talks" in Washington, to once again leave the barracks.

The emergence of a highly-trained and motivated far-right jihadi base in major population centers is an ominous development for Pakistan's democratic opposition. With the weak and increasingly isolated, Zardari government planning to take stern administrative and police measures against pro-democracy protesters planning to shut Islamabad down next week, the potential for attacks by Army-backed provocateurs, under color of the "enforcement of Islamic law," cannot be discounted.

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