

Islambad bombing: Terrorists' message to Pakistan?

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

ON 20th September night, Islambad has seen the worst of terrorists' attacks. In a suicide attack, a huge truck bomb exploded at the gate of the Marriott Hotel in the capital turning the city landmark into an inferno.

The blast, which was thought to have been caused by more than 500 kilograms of explosives ignited gas cylinders in the kitchen, setting off a blaze that swept through the 300-room hotel. A security official said some victims leapt to their deaths rather than be burnt alive on the upper floors.

About 60 people were killed and more than 200 injured by the massive blast that could be heard 15 kilometres away. Authorities warned the death toll could rise as rescuers picked through the ruins.

Three foreigners are believed to have been killed in the attack, including the Czech ambassador to Pakistan, who phoned his embassy moments after the bombing from inside the hotel asking to be rescued. A Dipomat from Denmark is believed to be missing.

The bombing came on the first anniversary of Osama bin Laden's call for Pakistani Muslims to unleash jihad, or holy war, against the government, a vital ally in the US-led "war on terror" that has cracked down on militants.

No one has yet claimed responsibility for the blast, but the Pakistan Taliban based in the tribal areas along the Afghanistan border is believed to be behind the attack.

The White House has condemned the bombing and repeated its support for the Islamabad Government. Privately, US officials say Pakistan's leaders are doing too little to stop the insurgency.

Why Marriott Hotel?

The Marriott has been targeted several times before including a

suicide attack in January last year. The hotel, a chain of American hotels, is a symbol of wealth and prestige in the Pakistan capital. One of few five-star hotels in the city, it is favoured by many Western travellers. It is also a popular gathering place for the Pakistani elite.

The brazen attack appeared to have been timed to inflict maximum casualties, ripping through the hotel when it was packed with families having dinner to break the daily fast in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

The Marriott has blanket security. Few vehicles get past the gate and those that are allowed to enter are checked by security guards. But the truck bomb was so big it did not need to get any closer than the gate to cause complete destruction.

A message to Zardari?

The blast went off just half a kilometre from the Pakistan Prime Minister's residence where the President, Asif Ali Zardari, was dining with dignitaries.

Earlier the President, who was inaugurated a fortnight ago, had addressed the National Parliament for the first time and promised to "root out terrorism and extremism wherever and whenever they may rear their ugly heads".

But the attack on the Marriott, which came only hours later, made a mockery of those words. President Zardari gave a televised address after the blast in which he appealed for "all democratic forces" to help save Pakistan.

"Terrorism is a cancer in Pakistan. We are determined, God willing, we will rid the country of this cancer," he said. "I promise you that such actions by these cowards will not lower our resolve."

The BBC reported yesterday that Mr Zardari had cancelled a trip to the US, scheduled for this week, to meet President George Bush for the first time since taking over the presidency.

Mr Zardari, who heads the first



democratic government in Pakistan for a decade, is under intense pressure to deliver on his repeated vows to confront Pakistan's growing insurgency. The fragile governing coalition is also grappling with economic problems, including rampant inflation, which is sapping its public support.

Factors contributing to bombing

Bombing on the Marriott hotel in Islamabad, according to media, is Pakistan's September 11.

Observers say the Zardari Government is caught between the militant advance through the country and the demands from the US, which is extremely unpopular among most Pakistanis.

The perception that the Zardari Government is a tool of the US has played a significant part in the blast. Even though it has been at loggerheads with Washington over cross-border raids against militants, the Government remains closely allied to the West in the fight against al-Qa'ida and the Taliban.

The suicide bombing demonstrates the extent to which Pakistan-US alliance is under threat from al-Qa'ida and Taliban militants. Among the ruins of the hotel is a clear message: no target in Pakistan is beyond the militants, who believe they can bring the country to its knees.

Furthermore, the Federal Administered Territory (tribal areas) is outside the full control of Pakistan government. Traditionally they can do whatever they like so long they do not interfere with the

civilian administration. It is believed that since the tribal people see this war imposed on Pakistan by America, they created safe havens for the Islamic militants.

Informed observers believe that President Zia ul Huq had been responsible for the rise of militants during his rule between 1977 to 1988. He led Pakistan to so-called 'Islamist way', introduced Shariah Courts and played political gamble with the Islamic orthodoxy for retaining his power in the country.

Even some of the armed personnel became sympathetic to Islamic extremism.

Before 2001, Pakistan's ISI assisted the Talebans to control Afghanistan since 1996 and a section of Pakistan army was involved in it. Pakistan was one of the three countries (Saudi Arabia & UAE) that recognised Taliban-governed Afghanistan.

Suddenly former President Musharraf changed the policy supporting the US and fighting against the Talebans. Some of the lower echelons of the army were puzzled at the sudden change and psychologically were not prepared to change their sympathy towards Talebans and continue to demonstrate their support for Talebans.

Views by leading commentators

Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani author and an expert on Taliban's role in the region, said that Musharraf wanted to walk on both sides of the road, meaning that his war on terrorism did not prevent him from supporting militants to destabilise Indian-controlled Kashmir and Afghanistan, two strategic interests of Pakistan.

A leading US commentator on Pakistani affairs, Brian Glyn Williams, associate professor of Islamic History at the University of Massachusetts, said "Pakistan's alliance with Washington is what this is all about. The attack on the hotel is a message to the Pakistani leadership - end all co-operation with the Americans or pay the price."

"Both sides see Pakistan as a vital battlefield in their global struggle, and clearly Pakistani civilians are paying the price for being in the middle of this struggle," he said.

"It's a replay of Baghdad at its worst. But with a very significant difference - while most Pakistanis would decry the bombing, there is also an overwhelming feeling that

Pakistan, both under the military regime (of former president Pervez Musharraf) and now under the new civilian Government, has gone too far in supporting the US and the West in their war against al-Qa'ida and the Taliban."

Marvin Weinbaum, a former Pakistan intelligence analyst at the US State Department, said the Marriott attack was designed to destabilise the Government and to shatter international confidence in Mr Zardari's leadership.

"This is part of the larger campaign to destabilise the country and to show the new Government cannot keep the country secure and that the militants can strike anywhere, any time they want," Dr Weinbaum said.

"But I think it's important to point out that the nature of the target was meant to have international repercussions."

"The US has felt under pressure to take unilateral action, which has raised the temperature between the US and Pakistan," said Lisa Curtis, a former senior adviser on South Asian issues in the State Department. The militants took the opportunity to show that they can terrorise at the heart of Pakistan.

Conclusion

The militants are fully aware that political parties are not united and a major party, Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League, does not see eye to eye on many issues with the Zardari government. Furthermore, the lawyers and civil society are against the government because of its reluctance to reinstate the deposed judges of the Supreme Court including the former chief justice Iftikhar Chowdhry. Observers note that unless there is a strong united government in Pakistan, terrorist attacks are likely to continue to exploit the fragility of the government.

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Khaleda-Hasina summit: Is it a good idea?

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

THIS Government was doing its best not too long ago to get rid of Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, believing that such a move was in nation's interests and easier said than done. It tried the minus-two formula but failed. Then it attempted to break the two parties to form a "king's party". That too failed. Now the Government has realized that there cannot be politics in Bangladesh without Khaleda and Hasina, nor without the BNP and the AL. The Commerce Adviser as the Government's Spokesman has thus suggested a "Summit" between the two ladies.

A reality check underlines the fact that the two ladies have firmly re-established their position as leader of their respective parties, neither of which has broken. This Government's initiatives for political reform have also not succeeded. It does not have the power anymore that it had when it came to office with widespread support of the people to exert pressure on politics. When politics has returned back to the laps of the two former Prime Ministers, what can a Summit between the two achieve?

A working relationship between Khaleda and Hasina, when Bangladesh came out of its long tryst with military dictatorship in 1991 could have achieved wonders for the nation. A lack of it influenced politics to degenerate into the streets where the two main parties, the BNP and the AL tried to dislodge each other from office to which the people freely elected them. Hundreds of days were lost in hartals that the two parties indulged in their unconstitutional ways to force an elected Government out of power in which the damage to the national economy ran into thousands of crores of taka. It is just not that the economy was damaged; people's livelihoods and their children's education were all equally adversely affected. State sponsored corruption earned Bangladesh the infamous crown as the most corrupt country in the world and we came to the doorsteps of being a failed state. In their lust for power, the politicians refused to acknowledge that hartals just made gover-

nance impossible but had no impact on its duration for despite the hartals, the three elected governments completed their terms.

It is common knowledge that the two ladies dislike each other immensely, the intensity much deeper in Hasina. There have been strange manifestations of the personal level where such dislike was taken. When the AL declared August 15th as National Mourning Day in 1996, the BNP started celebrating this day as Khaleda Zia's birthday. When Hasina came to office, her close associates were instructed to address her as "sir" because Khaleda Zia was referred to "madam" in official and party circles when she was in power. It is a pity that the two ladies, who are both victims of political assassinations, are so opposed to each other at personal level.

It is however worse that those who have been advising the two leaders never tried to ease the animosity between Khaleda Zia and Hasina that was at the root of the politics of agitation, violence and general mayhem in the streets. Instead, they did enough to make the two ladies drift further apart, afraid that by suggesting they make friendship, they would incur their wrath. Hence, they did the opposite, fanned their dislikes and helped sustain an unbelievable and unhealthy political climate that has harmed the nation immensely.

The same people are again by the side of the two leaders, apart from a few who are in jail. When the two leaders themselves were in jail, some of these leaders, encouraged by the minus-two initiative, had called for reforms in their respective parties. Now they are therefore more sycophantic to get back into favour of their respective leaders. The recent meetings in the Awami League have all been about Hasina and how much the nation and AL needs her leadership. Inside BNP, it is worse. In their first meeting with Khaleda after her bail, they elected her President for life, knowing this is fascism and the party constitution does not allow this. It is return to the politics of sycophancy in both the parties. The AL is out to re-establish the supremacy of their "Netri" while the BNP, their "Desh Netri". Thus

in both parties, the climate is not conducive for the Summit.

Of course, the two leaders could themselves decide on the Summit. But what would be its outcome? The problem between the two is not political for if it is so, there could be a resolution by discussion. It is deeper, something that Barrister Rafique who is taking upon the Commerce Adviser's call for the Summit is not competent to handle, his respect and acumen as a lawyer and his closeness to both the leaders notwithstanding. The problem between the two is rooted in their psyche that only a professional can help resolve. One must not forget that Hasina and Khaleda had no professional help after their tragedies. In case of Hasina, given the depth of the tragedy, the need was much greater. A legal mind, no matter how competent, may not be able to make any headway with the problem.

1/11 has created consciousness among the people against the nature of politics of the Awami League and BNP before emergency, their frustration with this Government notwithstanding. The details of corruption in top leadership in the two parties must have convinced Khaleda and Hasina that they have suffered humiliation largely because of their associates, though their failure to control them is unacceptable. On personal level, though cases have been framed against them for corruption, it is unlikely either will be finally convicted for neither has taken money for personal gains. In case of Hasina, she and her sister have gifted to the nation property many times more than the amount for which she is being accused. These factors are likely to weigh heavily on the two leaders as they start a new phase of politics in Bangladesh. 1/11 is a watershed in our politics.

A summit is not the realistic step to cash upon the gains the nation has achieved at considerable pain. Politics and its future now depend on how Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia handle their parties and their party leaders; not how they conduct their never-existing relationship with each other. It would be more fruitful if the Chief Adviser and the CEC would instead sit with the two ladies separately for the

following. First impress upon them that their working relationship is crucial for the country and in the past, Bangladesh has suffered immensely as a consequence of the lack of it. Second, convey to them that there is a consensus in the country that their dislike should not be at the expense of the country's future. Third, urge them to contest in the elections and accept the verdict. If they have problems with any issue relating to their participation, let them hear these and sort these out so that neither would have to resort to violence after the elections. Fourth, encourage them to nominate honest people in the next elections as there is now a consensus against corruption in politics. Fifth, make Parliament the main focus for resolution of conflicts through a bipartisan approach on national issues once elections are held. Finally, urge them to make hartal history and break the nexus of politics and crime. The CA has not yet shown his worth; let this initiative be his litmus test that he deserves the post he is holding at a critical stage of our history. Barrister Rafique could supplement this process by talking to the ladies separately instead of making a media event with a Summit.

A Summit between the two ladies is seventeen years too late. The focus should now be elsewhere for let us not forget that a lot has happened in the last eighteen months that has perhaps made the two ladies wiser. They need to be convinced that between them, they have Bangladesh's future in their hands and that theirs and the nation's enemies are in their own midst - the sycophants - who did not raise a finger when they were both incarcerated and they have suffered for the greed and corrupt nature of these sycophants by being in jail where they should not have gone in the first instance if they had controlled these enemies of the nation. If they can be made to see these realities around them, their closeness would follow naturally without the need of a Summit that seems to be coming to us as another media fanned drama. That is the last thing we need.

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9/11 and the great American decline

GLEN FORD

"SO, what do you think will happen now?" The question was posed by the taller of two young Israelis, my sole companions in this section of Liberty State Park on the Jersey City side of the Hudson River, the morning of September 11, 2001.

"Everything has changed," I replied, unaware that the same phrase was simultaneously forming on the lips of millions around the globe.

"Yes, everything has changed," said the Israeli, looking not at all displeased. He turned to resume taking photos of the great smoking space that had been the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, and of the huge, low cloud that drifted across New York Bay to Brooklyn.

My fellow witnesses to the collapse of the second tower were already positioned at the riverbank when I arrived at the scene on foot after having rushed past police who blocked all vehicular entrance to the park. The athletic, military age duo was clicking away with two very expensive-looking cameras. They spoke excitedly to each other in Hebrew - a language I instantly recognized from my two decades as a Manhattanite - but clumsily claimed to be "Polish" when I asked where they were from. I pretended to believe they were visitors from Poland.

Informed that I was a reporter, the taller, more gregarious one laughed giddily and exclaimed, "Yes, we are reporters, too!" He opened an attaché case to display two laminated New Jersey press cards that looked just like mine - except they were the wrong color. He cheerfully admitted the press cards were phony. "They are easy to make," he said, still laughing.

Their new-smelling car was parked nearby; it was the only vehicle in the lot, since the young men had clearly arrived before the police sealed the entrances to the park. When we were done gawking at the awful hole in the skyline across the river, the visitors allowed me to hitch a short ride home. As the day unfolded, news reports told of other, small groups of Israelis positioned at vantage points on the Jersey side of the Hudson. Some behaved shamelessly, loudly welcoming the new era in which "everything has changed."

My own theory is that my companions were probably senior students in a graduating class of one or another Israeli intelligence agencies. Co-ed groups of military-age Israelis pretending to be students of a non-existent Tel Aviv "arts school" had earlier that year been caught attempting to "visit" (infiltrate) sensitive U.S. security sites, as authoritatively reported at the time by a number of corporate media outlets.

At the very least, Israel knew something was up, and arranged for their graduate spies to be witnesses to history.

In the intervening years I have always maintained that, in one sense, it doesn't really matter what the Israelis or the U.S. government knew or did not know. The essence of the event lies in how it was received, framed and acted upon by the Bush regime: as a godsend - no matter how it was actually sent or by whom.

The Bush gang could no more conceal their excitement at the possibilities now opened to them by mass murder at the Twin Towers, than could my Israeli interlocutors at Liberty State Park. 9/11 was wielded as a kind of weapon to take down the planet, justification for a final assault on international order itself.

In its convulsive "response" to 9/11 - the worldwide "War on Terror" - the United States seized the opportunity to put in motion planetary aggressions that already existed in the blueprints of the neo-con's Project for a New American Century (PNAC). In effect, Washington was claiming revenge as the motive for crimes that it had long been planning to commit. Precise causality for the specific events of 9/11 becomes near irrelevant, submerged in the much larger aggression that was conceived long before the towers fell.

The strategic offensive to establish permanent U.S. global hegemony by force of arms, beginning with an invasion of Iraq, is truly the

event that was meant to "change everything." In the broad sweep of history, 9/11 may one day be viewed much like the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand, in 1914: as an occurrence that merely served to ignite the inevitable. The Bush regime desperately wanted a global war, and it got one.

And they became drunk, much like biblical descriptions of men drunk on their own ambitions. With the seemingly easy seizure of Baghdad and the apparent capitulation of the international community, the Bush regime drank fully of their own propaganda. Triumphant Capital and millennialist Christians and Zionists, speaking in tongues of pure aggression, imagined they had sealed the fates - ended the history of all the "lesser peoples" of the planet. Defense chief Donald Rumsfeld whirled in rabid dementia convinced that Iraqis were burning Baghdad in celebration of U.S. victory. "They're free," he frothed. "And free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things."

The corporate media began to speak of America as the "New Rome" - which was, tellingly, the same way Osama bin Laden started referring to the United States. But in Washington's version, there was no fall at the end of empire - no end at all, only a final equilibrium with the U.S. at the top.

Rome looms large in the imagination of white America (which does exist, despite what Barack Obama says). Europeans have long

noted that the United States has far more Roman- and Greek-styled columns than do Rome and Greece. These decadent, ostentatious knockoffs were the standard facades of Deep South mansions, each of them soaked in slave blood. America, conceived by its founders as an empire in the making, has always dreamed of outdoing Rome. For a brief time, the U.S. Lords of Capital and tens of millions of American racial chauvinists thought they were on the brink of a pan-Earth empire - until the Iraqi resistance halted Washington's grand offensive.

Stopped in their tracks, the would-be Romans now faced the same contradictions that had propelled them to declare endless war in the first place - but multiplied by bacchanalian military expenditures, steady shift of productive forces from North and West to South and East, dramatic erosion of the dollar's artificial supremacy, and a determination among nations to disentangle themselves from the dangerous, unhealthy American Century.

Looming like Doom is the Mother of All Bubbles, \$750 trillion in derivatives and other monetary inventions that former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and many of Europe's social democrats call "fictional capital." When the bubble bursts, which it must, then it can truly be said, "everything has changed."

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