

Pak blames US for Lahore attack

AP, LAHORE, Pakistan

Pakistanis lashed yesterday at the US, blaming its alliance with their government and its presence in Afghanistan for spurring two suicide bombers to kill 42 people at the country's most important Sufi shrine.

The reactions showed the challenge facing Washington and the Pakistani government when it comes to rallying public support against the Islamist extremism that has scarred the South Asian nation, even after an audacious attack on the moderate, Sufi-influenced Islam most Pakistanis practice.

Thousands of people had gathered late Thursday at the green-domed Data Darbar shrine in Lahore when bombs went off minutes apart. The blasts ripped concrete from the walls and left the white marble floor awash with blood. There was no claim of responsibility, but Islamist extremists consider Sufism -- a mystical strand of Islam -- to be heretical.

But yesterday, few Pakistanis interviewed saw militants at the root of the problem.

"America is killing Muslims in Afghanistan and in our tribal areas (with missile strikes), and militants are attacking Pakistan to express anger against the government for supporting America," said Zahid Umar, 25, who frequently visits the shrine, where 180 people were also wounded.

Pakistanis are suffering because of American policies and aggression in the region, said Mohammed Asif, 34, who runs an auto workshop in Lahore. He and others said the attacks would end if the US would pull out of Afghanistan.

Several other Pakistanis interviewed blamed the Ahmadis, a minority sect that has long faced discrimination in Pakistan. On May 28 in Lahore, gunmen and a suicide squad targeted two Ahmadi mosques, massacring at least 93 people, and some Pakistanis claimed the sect must have been seeking revenge.

Others cast about for additional villains --

though America's hand was seen there, too. Washington "is encouraging Indians and Jews to carry out attacks" in Pakistan, said Arifa Moen, 32, a teacher in the central city of Multan.

Pakistanis officials condemned the bombings, using language they have frequently used to try to convince the population that the fight against militancy is not one they can ignore.

"Those who still pretend that we are not a nation at war are complicit in these deaths," said Farahnaz Ispahani, a spokeswoman for Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari.

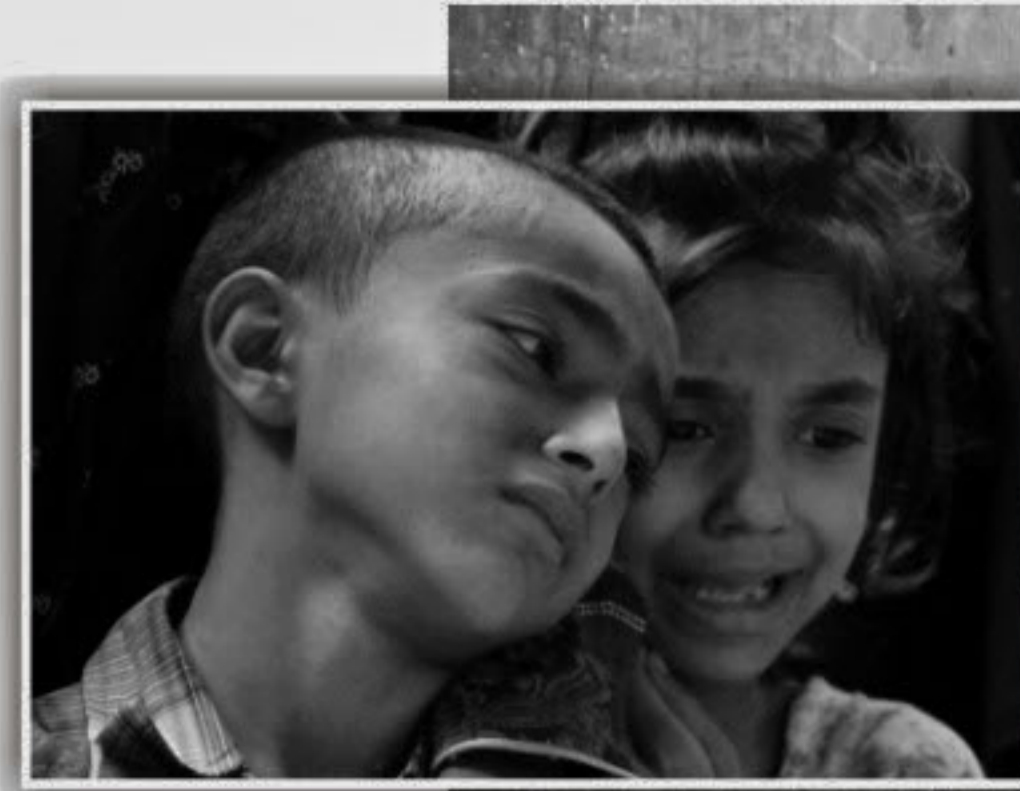
The US Embassy issued a statement Friday condemning the attack and saying it "demonstrates the terrorists' blatant disregard for the lives of the Pakistani people and the future of this country."

The targeted shrine is that of Data Ganj Bakhsh Hajveri, who lived hundreds of years ago and travelled throughout the region spreading a message of peace and love. He eventually settled in the Lahore area, and his shrine is the most revered and most popular of Sufi shrines in the nation.

Lahore, the capital of Punjab province, is a key military, political and cultural hub. The city has witnessed several audacious attacks on diverse targets over the past two years, from crowded markets to Sri Lanka's cricket team.

The Pakistani government has been accused of lacking the will to crack down on militants in Punjab, the country's most populous and most powerful region. Many of the militants are part of now-banned groups launched with government support in the 1980s and '90s to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan and pressure archenemy India.

Some recent attacks in Punjab have been blamed on the "Punjabi Taliban." The group is a relatively new network of al-Qaeda-linked militants who have split off from other local insurgent groups but also has ties to the Pakistani Taliban, which has its bases in the northwest tribal regions.



A Pakistani devotee yesterday looks at the wreckage following the suicide bomb attacks the night before at the shrine of Sufi saint Hazrat Syed Ali bin Usman Hajveri, popularly known as Data Ganj Bakhsh, in Lahore. Inset, The children of a man who was killed by the blast weep over his coffin.

PHOTO: AFP



Pak bombers caught on dramatic TV footage

AFP, Lahore

The scenes of carnage at one of Pakistan's holiest shrines was caught on camera by closed circuit televisions which recorded the bombers in the final moments before they blew themselves up.

The dramatic footage shows a security guard at the Sufi shrine in the eastern city of Lahore chasing after one of the bombers shortly before a huge blast which sent crowds of panicked worshippers fleeing in all directions.

The images broadcast by local television channels were obtained from close circuit television cameras installed at the Data Ganj Bakhsh shrine where the twin suicide attack late Thursday left 42 worshippers dead.

They showed hundreds of white-robed followers of Sufi saint Hazrat Syed Ali bin Usman Hajveri crowding into the centuries-old mausoleum before the blast.

A guard identified as Salim Raza, who was posted at an entry gate equipped with a scanner, detected a suspicious man clad in a green turban, white robes and a shawl and carrying a bag.

He ran after the bomber who seconds later detonated his explosives, engulfing the site in a huge cloud of white smoke and leaving the white marble floor splattered with blood, body parts and people's belongings.

Turk airstrike hits Kurd rebel targets in Iraq

REUTERS, Istanbul

Turkish planes bombed Kurdish rebel targets in northern Iraq, the military said yesterday, following a spate of militant attacks on Turkish soil.

"Separatist terrorist organisation targets were hit by Turkish Armed Forces planes last night in Northern Iraq, notably in the Qandil mountain and Hakurk region," the army said.

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has bases in northern Iraq, from where it launches attacks on Turkish troops and military installations. More than 50 soldiers have been killed as a result of PKK attacks over the last several months.

Thai attacks kill nine in two days

Police say; six army men among dead

AFP, Narathiwat

Nine people, including six military personnel, have been killed in two days of bomb and gun attacks in Thailand's insurgency-plagued southern provinces, police said yesterday.

A roadside bomb late Thursday killed three military rangers on patrol in Ruso district in Narathiwat, one of three troubled Muslim-majority provinces near the Malaysian border.

A security volunteer and a deputy village headman travelling with them also died in the attack by suspected Islamist separatists, police said.

The bomb, containing about 20 kilos (45 pounds) of explosives, was buried in a dirt road and detonated by wire. The attackers then opened fire on the vehicle and seized weapons before fleeing the scene.

In a separate incident, three soldiers were killed when a bomb blast ripped through their patrol vehicle Friday in neighbouring Yala province, police said.

A 46-year-old Muslim village leader also died on the way to hospital after she was shot Friday in a drive-by shooting in Mayo district in Pattani province, police said.

Illegal arms trade flourishes in Nepal tourist area

BBC ONLINE

The central Kathmandu tourist district of Thamel has become a centre for illegal trade in guns and small arms.

Kathmandu's police chief said the area was becoming increasingly violent because of its popularity with the city's drug dealers and criminals.

With cheap restaurants, backpacker hostels and shops, Thamel has long been the tourist capital of Nepal.

Most tourists spend at least a day here before heading out into the country to go trekking or rafting.

But in recent years, the cafes selling banana pancakes and vegetarian food have been joined by strip bars and dance clubs, many of them employing underage girls who have been trafficked into the

capital from the countryside.

"Problem remains" "We're finding a lot of criminal transactions are taking place in Thamel," said Superintendent of Police Ramesh Kharel.

"We're trying to contain the growing gun culture, but the problem remains." Thamel shopkeepers say that criminal gangs are gaining more and more power in the district.

"They come here at night and fight and even fire their guns," said one shopkeeper who refused to give his name out of fear.

"We're all scared, we want freedom from this, but there are too many of them," he said.

Superintendent Kharel said that many of the guns used by the gangs were smuggled from the border from India, in particular from the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

"There is a well-known gun culture in these places and it's easy for criminals to cross the border without being checked," he said.

He added that he had seen an increase in small arms coming into Nepal from Lhasa, across the northern Chinese border.

A local resident, who also declined to give his name, said that Thamel was becoming notorious as Kathmandu's red-light and hard-drinking district.

"It's very difficult for the women in my family to walk through the streets without being harassed," he said.

He said he was worried that the increase in violence would scare foreign tourists away.

Superintendent Kharel said the police had increased patrols and stepped up intelligence gathering in the area.

Frustration in Gaza at 'bursting point'

Says UN official

AFP, Tokyo

Frustration among refugees in Gaza has reached "bursting point" with further unrest likely unless Israel lifts its blockade against them immediately, the head of a UN aid body said yesterday.

Filippo Grandi, commissioner-general of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, also told reporters in Tokyo the UN body faces financial crisis, calling for more support from Japan and world donors.

One suspect released, nine held in spy case

REUTERS, New York

A woman accused of being a Russian spy was ordered released and placed under home arrest on Thursday, but nine other suspects in an espionage case that has revived Cold War memories remained in federal custody.

A New York judge ruled that Vicky Pelaez, a columnist for the New York Spanish-language daily *El Diario*, be freed on bond but held in her home and monitored electronically.

Authorities say Peruvian-born Pelaez and 10 other alleged spies spent a decade living quiet lives in US cities and suburbs, all the while recruiting political sources and gathering information for the Russian government.



A passenger reads the Daily Telegraph newspaper, featuring a front-page interview with the ex-husband of accused Russian spy Anna Chapman, on the underground in London yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Ex-husband says spy wife dominated by father in KGB

AFP, London

The British ex-husband of a key figure in the Russia-US spy storm told how his glamorous former wife became "obnoxious" and dominated by her KGB father, in an interview published yesterday.

Alex Chapman told the Daily Telegraph he was suspicious that Anna Chapman, the flame-haired 28-year-old now in detention in the United States, had become "conditioned" even before their marriage collapsed in 2005.

He said he was surprised to hear she had gone to the United States because his ex-wife had always made disparaging remarks about Americans and said she did not want to go there.

Alex Chapman, now a 30-year-old trainee psychiatrist, told the Telegraph that he met then Anna Kushchenko at a London party in September 2001. They married five months later in Moscow after a whirlwind romance.

The Telegraph said British intelligence was now investigating whether she had worked as a spy when she lived in Britain or was recruited when she lived there.

"Anna told me her father had been high up in the ranks of the KGB. She said he had been an agent in 'old Russia'," he told the Telegraph.

The couple visited the father, Vasily

Kushchenko, in Zimbabwe where he was officially working as a diplomat.

"Her father controlled everything in her life, and I felt she would have done anything for her dad. When I saw that she had been arrested on suspicion of spying it didn't come as much of a surprise to be honest."

The father seemed a "scary" man, he said. "He didn't trust anyone. He asked me why I had chosen a Russian bride and asked what business I had done in Russia, and I said none," said the Briton.

"He was scary. He would never introduce me to other Russian people who came to the house and he always seemed to have a lot more security than the other diplomats."

"He had a Land Rover with blacked-out windows and there was always one car in front of it and one car behind," he added.

Alex Chapman said that at first his wife had been carefree and led a "bohemian" lifestyle but she changed dramatically during the four years of their marriage.

"When she was still living in London she fell in with a group of people who had a lot of influence. She would go to film premieres and become arrogant and obnoxious, always going on about powerful people she was meeting," he said.

Mexican gang gunfight near US border leaves 21 dead

BBC ONLINE

At least 21 people have been killed in a gunfight between two of Mexico's most powerful drug cartels near the border with the US, officials have said.

The incident occurred off a remote dirt track near the city of Nogales, in the northern state of Sonora, they said.

Nine people have been arrested, six of whom were wounded in the confrontation. Correspondents say gangs are involved in smuggling drugs and people to the US, and have been battling for control of the area -- a key trafficking route.

However, they rarely stage such large-scale shootouts, they add.

There was no indication about what specifically triggered Thursday's gunfight between the Sinaloa cartel, led by Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, and an offshoot, the Beltran Leyva cartel.

All of the victims were believed to be mem-

bers of the gangs.

The BBC's Julian Miglierini in Mexico City says the fact that the violence happened only 20km (12 miles) from Arizona will do little to allay US fears that Mexico's unrest is getting increasingly close.

On Wednesday night in the northern border city of Ciudad Juarez, gunmen killed Sandra Salas Garcia, an assistant attorney-general of Chihuahua state, and one of her bodyguards.

Meanwhile, a severed head was reportedly left on Thursday outside the home of the leading candidate for the mayor of Ciudad Juarez, Hector Murguia. Fourteen states will hold elections on Sunday.

For months, candidates have complained of intimidation by the gangs and have been forced to limit their campaigning in high-risk areas.

Rodolfo Torre Cantu, who was running for governor in the north-eastern state of Tamaulipas, was shot dead along with four of his supporters near Ciudad Victoria on Monday.

New US sanctions on Iran toughest ever

Obama says

REUTERS, Washington

President Barack Obama signed into law on Thursday far-reaching new sanctions on Iran that aim to squeeze the Islamic Republic's fuel imports and deepen its international isolation.

Obama said the new sanctions were the toughest ever passed by the US Congress and would make it harder for Iran to buy refined petroleum as well as goods and services to modernize its oil and natural gas sector, the mainstay of its economy.

While the door to diplomacy remained open, he said, Iran would come under even greater international pressure if it

continued to defy international calls to halt its uranium enrichment program.

The United States and its European allies suspect Iran is trying to build an atomic bomb, despite Tehran's insistence that its nuclear program is for the peaceful generation of electricity.

"There should be no doubt -- the United States and the international community are determined to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons," Obama said at the signing of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act at the White House.

European Union leaders agreed last

month to tighten UN sanctions on Iran with additional measures targeting Iran's financial, banking, insurance, transportation and energy sectors.

The new US sanctions go much further than the measures agreed to by the UN Security Council in June and are aimed at ratcheting up pressure on Iran to persuade it to return to international talks on its disputed nuclear program.

The US sanctions penalize companies supplying Iran with gasoline and international banking institutions involved with Iran's increasingly powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or its nuclear program.

Netanyahu looks forward to Obama talks

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is looking forward to a warmer White House welcome from President Barack Obama next week after their relationship hit a lowpoint over Jewish settlement policy.

Due at the White House on Tuesday for talks postponed a month ago after a deadly raid on a Gaza aid flotilla, Netanyahu will be able to point to boxes he has ticked -- albeit in pencil -- on Obama's wishlist of steps towards peace.