

By Fred Burton and Scott Stewart

On March 31, Baitullah Mehsud, commander of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), called The Associated Press and Reuters to claim responsibility for the March 29 attack against a Pakistani police academy in Manawan, which is near the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore and the Indian border. The attack had been previously claimed by a little-known group, Fedayeen al-Islam (FI), which also took responsibility for the bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad in September 2008.

Mehsud has also released an Urdu-language audio message claiming responsibility for the Manawan attack as well as a failed March 23 attack on the headquarters of the Police Special Branch in Islamabad. Mehsud, whom authorities claim was behind the March 3 attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore, also warned that there would be additional attacks all across the country in retaliation for U.S. drone strikes in the Federally Administered Tribal Area. He even threatened to launch attacks in Washington, D.C.

It is not clear at this point if the two claims of responsibility for the Manawan attack are indeed contradictory. If FI is an independent group, it is possible that it was working with Mehsud in the assault on the police academy. However, it is also quite possible that FI is either part of the larger TTP (which is an umbrella group with many factions) or perhaps just a nom de guerre used by the TTP to claim certain attacks. When a reporter asked about the FI claim, Mehsud refused to comment. Two things can be ascertained from this: that Mehsud's organization has the ability to conduct these attacks, and that a major jihadist figure like Mehsud has no real need to claim the attacks of others to bolster his reputation. In fact, lying about such a thing would hurt his well-established reputation.

It is a good bet, therefore, that the TTP was in fact involved in the Manawan attack. The odds are even greater when one considers the intelligence reports from a few days prior to the attack: that Mehsud had dispatched a group of 22 operatives from his base in South Waziristan, through the town of Mianwali in southwestern Punjab, to conduct attacks in Lahore and Rawalpindi. Pakistani authorities were actively searching for those operatives when the attack occurred in Manawan.

While STRATFOR has already published a political assessment of the Manawan attack, we believe it might also be interesting to look at the incident from a protective intelligence standpoint and examine the tactical aspects of the operation in more detail.

Sequence of events

The attack on the police academy in Manawan happened at approximately 7:20 a.m. on March 29 as more than 800 unarmed police cadets were on the parade field for their regularly

scheduled morning training. Witness reports suggest that there were 10 attackers who scaled the back wall of the academy and began to attack the cadets. Part of the attack team reportedly was dressed in police uniforms, while the rest reportedly wore shalwar kameez (traditional Pakistani dress). Several members of the team also wore suicide belts, and at least some of them carried large duffle bags (similar to those carried by the assailants in the November 2008 Mumbai attacks and the March 3 attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore). The gunmen reportedly engaged the cadets with hand grenades and fire from assault rifles. As the gunmen raked the parade ground, many of the cadets reportedly fled the compound or barricaded themselves in various rooms inside the facility. Because the bulk of the people at the academy were cadets and not trained police, they were not issued firearms.

The armed guards at the academy were able to offer some resistance, but the attack team was able to make its way across the parade ground and into the barracks, where the attackers established defensive positions, apparently with the hope of initiating a prolonged hostage situation. Reports are conflicting as to how many hostages they were actually able to seize and control inside the barracks.

The Pakistani police and military responded aggressively to the attack. Within about 30 minutes, officers from the Elite Force - a highly trained branch of the Punjab Police responsible for counterterrorism - reportedly had surrounded the barracks building. By 9 a.m., paramilitary Pakistan Rangers and Pakistani army troops began to arrive. Many of the wounded cadets were evacuated from the parade ground using armored personnel carriers (APCs) to protect them from the attackers' fire. The attackers apparently attempted to use grenades to attack the APCs, but were met with heavy suppressive fire from the security forces. Pakistani forces also apparently used tear gas against the attackers, as well as APCs and helicopter gunships. Eventually, the Elite Force went room to room to clear the barracks building of attackers. By 4 p.m., the siege had ended, with six of the attackers captured and four killed. (Three of the four reportedly killed themselves using suicide belts.) Despite initial reports of high casualties, it now appears that only eight police officers or cadets were killed in the attack, with more than 90 others wounded.

While armed assaults against paramilitary forces, convoys and other targets are common along the border with Afghanistan, this attack was only the second such attack in Lahore. Terrorist attacks in Pakistan have more commonly been committed by suicide bombers, and it appears that Mehsud's group may have embraced a change in tactics, perhaps influenced by the success of Mumbai. (However, as we will discuss below, this latest attack, like the attack on the cricket team, was far from a spectacular success.)

Analysis

First, it must be recognized that jihadist attacks on police recruits are not uncommon. We have seen attacks on police training and recruiting centers in Iraq and Afghanistan, among other countries, and we have also seen them before in Pakistan. On July 15, 2007, a suicide bomber attacked a police recruitment center in Dera Ismail Khan, killing 26 people and wounding 35. The victims were at the center to take medical and written tests for entering the police force.

A training center like the one in Manawan provides an unusually large concentration of targets. The more than 800 cadets at the academy were a far larger group of police than is normally found in the police stations scattered throughout the country. The training center was also a far softer target than a traditional police station, where all the officers are armed. From media reports, it appears that there were only seven armed guards on duty at the academy at the time of the attack. The instructors allegedly were armed only with lathis (long canes commonly used by police in India and Pakistan). The academy's rigid training schedule also provided a highly predictable target, as the attackers knew the cadets would be on the parade field from 7-8 a.m. every day.

With so many potential targets on the parade field and in the barracks, and with so many attackers, it is amazing that there were only eight people killed in this attack (one-fourth the death toll of the April 2007 Virginia Tech shooting). This is an indication that the Manawan attackers were not nearly as well trained in marksmanship as the assault team that conducted the November Mumbai attacks, in which 10 gunmen killed 173 people. The 10 heavily armed Manawan assailants did not even succeed in killing one victim each in a situation akin to shooting fish in a barrel.

From a military standpoint, such a formation of massed people in the open would have been far more effectively targeted using mortars and crew-served machine guns, so it can also be argued that the attack was poorly planned and the attackers improperly equipped to inflict maximum casualties. Even so, it is quite amazing to us that attackers armed with assault rifles and grenades did not kill one victim apiece.

Of course, one thing that helped contain the carnage was the response of Pakistani security personnel and their efforts to evacuate the wounded under fire. While not exactly practicing what are known in the United States as "active shooter procedures", the Elite Force officers did quickly engage the attackers and pin them down until more firepower could be brought to bear. The Elite Force also did a fairly efficient job of clearing the barracks of attackers. The Pakistani response ensured that the incident did not drag on like the Mumbai attacks did. The Elite Force went in hard and fast, and seemingly with little regard for the hostages being held, yet their decisive action proved to be very effective, and the result was that a minimum number of hostages were killed.

There were some significant differences from the situation in Mumbai. First, there was only one crime scene to deal with, and the Pakistani authorities could focus all their attention and resources there. Second, the barracks building was far smaller and simpler than the hotels occupied in the Mumbai attacks. Third, Manawan is far smaller and more isolated than Mumbai, and it is easier to pin the attackers down in a city of that size than in a larger, more densely populated city such as Mumbai. Finally, there were no foreign citizens involved in the hostage situation, so the Pakistani authorities did not have to worry about international sensibilities or killing a foreign citizen with friendly fire. They were able to act aggressively and not worry about distractions - or the media circus that Mumbai became.

The future

Perhaps the most important thing to watch going forward will be the response of the Pakistani people to these attacks. In his claim of responsibility, Mehsud said the Manawan attack was in direct response to the expanding U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) campaign in Pakistan. Mehsud threatened that there would be more militant attacks in Pakistan and the United States if the UAV attacks did not stop. Clearly, Mehsud is feeling the heat from these attacks, and although he claims he is ready to be martyred, his bravado is belied by the fact that he is taking such extraordinary measures to try to halt the UAV campaign. He obviously fears the UAV strikes, not only for what they can do to him, but for what they can do to degrade his organization.

When the Elite Force completed the clearing of the barracks, several officers came out on the roof of the building, shouted "God is great" and fired celebratory shots into the air (something that is anathema to Western police and military forces). Many of the people gathered outside the academy joined in the shouting and loudly cheered the Elite Force. This sentiment was widely echoed in the Pakistani media.

Although the Manawan attack was intended to demoralize Pakistani security forces, it may have just the opposite effect. The bravery and dedication exhibited by the Pakistani police and soldiers who responded to the attack may instead serve to steel their will and instill professional pride. Mehsud's recent threats, along with the militant attacks, may also work to alienate him from people who had been supportive of - or at least ambivalent toward - him and the jihadists.

Up until 2003, the Saudi public, and many in the government, pretty much turned a blind eye to the actions of jihadists in Saudi Arabia as long as the jihadists were concentrating their attacks on targets outside the kingdom. But when the jihadists declared war on the Saudi royal family and began to conduct attacks against targets inside the kingdom that resulted in the deaths of ordinary Saudis, the tide of public opinion turned against them and the Saudi government reacted aggressively, smashing the jihadists. Similarly, it was the brutality of al Qaeda in Iraq that helped turn many Iraqi Sunnis against the jihadists there. Indeed, an insurgency cannot survive long without the support of the people. In the case of Pakistan, that also goes for the support of Inter-Services Intelligence and the army. The TTP, al Qaeda and their Kashmiri militant allies simply cannot sustain themselves without at least the tacit support of Pakistan's intelligence apparatus and army. If these two powerful establishments ever turn against them, the groups will be in serious peril.

Pakistan has long been able to control the TTP and al Qaeda more than it has. The country has simply lacked the will, for a host of reasons. It will be interesting to watch and see if Mehsud's campaign serves to give the Pakistani people, and the authorities, the will they need to finally take more serious steps to tackle the jihadist problem. Having long battled deep currents of jihadist thought within the country, the Pakistani government continues to face serious challenges. But if the tide of public support begins to turn against the jihadists, those challenges will become far more manageable.

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