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## Terror Stalked the Streets of Pakistan in 2008

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Islamist militant violence in December 2007 had climaxed with the brutal assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto soon after an election rally at Rawalpindi, south of Islamabad, taking the suicide bombings to 56 that year. Similar violence during the year 2008 peaked with a deadly attack on December 28 in the Buner district of the Northwestern Frontier Province (NWFP), where a suicide bomber rammed an explosives-laden car in to a polling station. When the bomber exploded the vehicle by the polling station, hundreds of people had lined up there to elect a new representative to the National Legislature, following the sudden demise of the local MP Abdul Matin Khan.

Muslim Khan, the Swat-based spokesperson for the TTP claimed responsibility and warned of more attacks. Khan told the private TV channels including the Doha-based Al-Jazeera TV the attack was to avenge the killing of six Taliban by Buner locals in the summer.

The Buner incident and the warning by the TTP spokesman betrayed a grim reality facing Pakistan; the conflict between the Pakistani army and the militants had actually accentuated by the end of 2008; a Dec. 28 report by a private Pakistani news agency SANA (published in the Urdu daily Jang Dec 29, 2008) said suicide bombers struck 61 times during the year, killing 889 people. Another report by the mass circulation daily The News (Dec 31) recounted about 66 suicide attacks and 965 deaths thereof all over the country, taking the average monthly casualties to at least 80.

The News said 53 of these suicide attacks took place in the same region i.e. FATA and the NWFP. This brought the total tally of such attacks in the northwestern regions since 2006 to about 57. It also suggested that the entire region found itself in the grip of unprecedented violence that had gradually infected cities like Peshawar and Kohat, where mostly the security forces were the prime targets, leaving at least 154 police officials dead and close to 300 injured. This also meant that the Frontier Province and the FATA region bore the brunt of terrorism, suffering about 45 suicide bombings altogether. The Swat region topped the districts with about a dozen suicide attacks, followed by four in Peshawar.

The rest - one-fourth of the suicide attacks - caused mayhem in major cities like Karachi, Islamabad, Lahore

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and Rawalpindi. The most destructive – as far as the impact on the country as a whole - was the one on the Marriott Hotel in the well-guarded government district of Islamabad. It killed at least five dozen people, charred the interior and sent shock waves across the country.

The Marriott, which reopened on Dec 28 after a massive and speedy restoration operation, also shook local and foreign investors' confidence to the core, unleashing an economic and financial crisis that was contained only through a multi-billion dollar package

by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in late November.

Within hours of the Marriott attack, Rehman Malik, the interior ministry advisor, told a press conference that preliminary investigation of the bombing suggested a strong connection with South Waziristan Agency. "It is premature to blame any particular group or individual, Malik said, but all roads lead to Waziristan," Malik said in a reference to Baitullah Meshud's TTP.

It was, however, not the five dozen or so suicide strikes that sowed fear and uncertainty in peoples hearts and mind; the last month of 2008 also witnessed a dramatic surge in attacks on the cargo meant for the Afghanistan-based US and NATO troops. Within the first two weeks of December, militants carried out multiple strikes, most of them in and around Peshawar, to convey they can hit targets at will. More than 300 High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (Humvee), an all-purpose, modern-day jeep used by the U.S. military, and armored personnel carriers, basically destined for the US forces, were the prime targets. Besides, about a dozen or so incidents involving abductions of small convoys carrying food and other necessities for NATO and US troops in Afghanistan were also reported during 2008. Almost two-thirds of these supplies are imported via Pakistan's Karachi Port and Port Qasim on the Arabian Sea, and transported by road from there first to Peshawar before onward shipment to Afghanistan through the Khyber Agency.

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cohesive and comprehensive counter-terror strategy will only embolden those who have begun striking at the symbols of a functional state to create chaos and confusion.

Maulvi Omer, the spokesman for the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), on December 14 finally claimed responsibility for these attacks. He told reporters by phone from an undisclosed location "the series of attacks on terminals in Peshawar were a response to the Americans for their drone strikes inside Pakistan."

This deterioration eventually evoked another mighty response by the security establishment on the penultimate day of the year i.e. on Dec 30, backed up by para-military forces, the authorities launched an operation named 'Daraghlum' (a Pashto phrase meaning "Here I come") in the Khyber Agency.

### **Outlook for 2009:**

Regardless of the official claims and the results of the operation in the Khyber Agency, widespread violence – some 475 acts of terrorism i.e. bomb blasts, suicide bombings, sniper attacks, and ambushes of officials in the Frontier Province alone – the outlook for the immediate future does not look encouraging.

According to a recent Gallup Pakistan survey, only nine percent Pakistanis are hopeful of better times in 2009. In April 2008, over two months after the general elections, as many as 60 percent Pakistanis had hoped things would improve.

Besides the political uncertainty, the financial crisis, the stock market crash slump, and the crippling energy crisis, the sharp spike in violence – just about six suicide bombings in 2006 compared with 56 in 2007 and at least 61 in 2008 -suggests that the trail of violence flowing from Waziristan and knocking targets down all over Pakistan has confronted the people and the state of Pakistan with a crisis of confidence and survival.

Officials believe that the unusual level of sophistication, planning and preparedness underlies the spate of violence that shook Pakistan to the core during 2008.

Containing the monster of Al Qaeda-inspired political violence wrapped in anti-Americanism requires a massive and sophisticated response.

Building capacity of the entire security and intelligence apparatus must take precedence over political rhetoric. Without raising the manpower strength, and elevating the intellectual and professional capacity of the intelligence apparatus it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to contain, blunt and totally decapitate the monster. Purging the society of the "forces of chaos mired in the medieval mindset" might be possible through a reinforced security and intelligence based on merit, sincerity and devolution, supported by an empowered community. The absence of a