

TODAY'S PAPER | MAY 29, 2020

Taliban massacre 131 schoolchildren: Principal among 141 dead in attack on Army Public School, Peshawar

Ismail Khan | December 17, 2014



PESHAWAR: Relatives of Mohammed Ali Khan, 15, killed by Taliban in the school attack grieve at his house on Tuesday.—Reuter

PESHAWAR: In the deadliest terror attack in the country's history, 131 schoolchildren and 10 other people were killed when heavily armed militants stormed an army-run public school here on Tuesday morning.

Security officials and doctors said that the Principal of the Army Public School & College, Tahira Qazi, was among the nine staff members killed.

A large number of children, 121, and three staff members were among those wounded. Seven soldiers of the Special Services Group and two officers were among the wounded, the Director General of Inter-Services Public Relations, Maj Gen Asim Bajwa, said.

"This is the darkest day in the history of Pakistan," he said at a press briefing at Corps Headquarters, Peshawar.

Earlier, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Chief of the Army Staff Gen Raheel Sharif arrived in the provincial capital to oversee the rescue operation.

The prime minister announced a three-day national mourning to express solidarity with the families of those who lost their loved ones in the barbaric attack.

According to a senior security official, nine militants wearing paramilitary uniforms scaled the rear wall of the school on Warsak Road with the aid of ladders, cut the barbed wire at the top of the wall and then ran onto the school premises firing their weapons and throwing grenades in several directions.

The official said the vehicle used to carry the militants to the school was set alight by them before they scaled the wall, though the official also claimed that it appeared the militants had entered the school from at least two directions. The shooting and clean-up operation continued for around seven hours.

"They set the vehicle on fire to divert the attention of the people to it before entering the school from the rear building," the official said. "They had come loaded. They just sprayed bullets," the official said, requesting he not be named because he was not authorised to speak to the media.

How did they manage to bring such a big quantity of arms and ammunition is a big question.

"There were nine of them. Six of them were suicide bombers; they blew themselves up and the others were taken down by soldiers of the Special Services Group," the official said.

Who were the militants?

A spokesman for the outlawed Mullah Fazlullah-led Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan accepted responsibility for the attack. Fazlullah is believed to be in Nazian district of Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan.

Mohammad Khurasani told reporters from an undisclosed location that the attack was carried out in retaliation to the military operation in North Waziristan and the killing of militants in government custody.

All nine militants, who took part in the attack, have been identified, the official said. The attack was led by a commander, Chamtu.

The official said the militants were in direct communication with their handler in Afghanistan, Umar Naray, alias Umar Khalifa Adinzai – a well-known commander of the TTP's Tariq Geedar group. "He was directing the suicide bombers and the attack group," the official said.

He, however, said that the militants appeared to be more than nine. "Our feeling is that they were between 16 and 17. Children spoke of some militants speaking a foreign language. We believe there could be some Uzbeks amongst them," the official said.

But officials seemed uncertain about what happened to the other militants, over and above the nine identified, or where they might have gone.

Gen Bajwa said the Quick Response Force and the SSG had reached the school within 10 to 15 minutes of the attack.

Most of the casualties, however, seemed to have occurred in the school's main auditorium where an instructor was giving children first aid lessons, officials and students said.

An official speaking on the condition of anonymity described a grisly scene where bodies of the schoolchildren were piled up near an exit of the main auditorium. Several of the bodies appear to have been decapitated, according to the official.

"We were in the auditorium when militants barged in, shooting. Our instructor asked us to duck and lie down and then I saw militants walking past rows of students shooting them in the head," Zeeshan, a seventh-grade student, said at the hospital.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Information Minister Mushtaq Ghani said that most of the deaths had been caused by bullet wounds to the head. "Most of them have been shot in the head."

At the Combined Military Hospital, bodies of schoolchildren lined up, many had wounds characteristic of a single shot to the head.

A seven-year-old student, Afaq, said the militants entered their classroom and started shooting. “They killed our teacher,” he said, breaking down in tears.

“These attackers were not in the mood to take hostages,” the security official said, adding: “They were there to kill and this is what they did.”

The death toll means the Peshawar school attack is the deadliest terrorist attack since bombings at a public rally to welcome PPP chairperson Benazir Bhutto in Karachi in October 2007 left 139 people dead.

Gen Bajwa said the troops had rescued 960 students and staff members during the operation.

There were 2,500 students in both the senior and junior sections, the information minister said.

Was there an intelligence threat alert?

According to an official familiar with official alerts, a terror threat alert was issued to the KP government on Aug 25 and 27 warning of an impending attack on an army public school.

Gen Asif Bajwa, however, denied there was any specific intelligence regarding the attack on the school.

The threat alert was also reiterated through a circular from the National Counter-Terrorism Authority. Three days ago, the official said, the government was informed that militants had entered Peshawar to carry out the attack.

Published in Dawn, December 17th, 2014