

Scenario 181

TALIBAN TURNED AGGRESSIVE

TALIBAN'S GRIP - A DECADE BACK:

Peep into an era of early 2007 when the military rule of Gen Musharraf was mature enough.

The Taliban and al Qaeda were not satisfied with their un-humanly activities keeping confined to the tribal belt or the Khyber PK province of Pakistan. The pro-Taliban leadership in the country went emboldened by the weakness of Gen Musharraf's government and openly challenged the rule of law at ***Lal Masjid*** in Islamabad.

Lal Masjid and its adjacent *Hafsa madrassa*, boasting over 7,000 ladies and gentlemen students, successfully managed to enforce the Taliban-style system of 'moral policing' in matters of 'vice and virtue'. Then their organised factions started visiting shops, threatening them with dire consequences if they didn't stop selling DVDs, CDs or music cassettes. People were also issued directives about dress codes and other 'moral and ethical' requirements as per Islamic injunctions.

During the last week of March 2007, the ***Lal Masjid*** militia picked up a woman, her daughter in law and her infant, and held them because they were allegedly running a brothel; Maulana Aziz gave a deadline of one week for implementation of Shriah Law. "***If we find a woman with loose morals, we will prosecute her in Lal Masjid,***" Maulana Aziz announced in Friday prayers.

On 26th March 2007, Gen Musharraf's government signed an uncertain Bajaur Accord, which ceded control of the region to the local Taliban under the guise of dealing with the local tribes.

[Bajaur Accord:

On 17th March 2007; *Gen Musharraf's military government came to an official verbal agreement with the Mohmand tribe; it was*

*with the Salarzai and Utmankhel tribes, as well as the 'local Taliban,' also known as the **Tehrik e Nifaz e Shariat e Mohammadi** [the **TNSM**, or Movement for the Implementation of Sharia Law of the holy Prophet Mohammad PBUH].*

On 26th March 2007; one Malik Abdul Aziz signed the agreement on behalf of the Taliban saying that:

"The local Taliban organisation has authorised me to sign this agreement and they have assured that they will not take part in any subversive activity."

Under the provisions of this accord, the tribesmen and militants agreed not to give foreign militants safe haven in the area or allow 'subversive' activities, while the authorities pledged not to make arrests without consulting the elders.

The government agreed NOT to raid any place without any solid proof and to withdraw warrants of arrests issued against Agency's people on the basis of suspicion.

However, the Pakistani government had not agreed to withdraw military and security forces, unlike the Waziristan Accord.

The 'local Taliban' wasted no time in flexing its muscles. On the very same day the Bajaur Accord was signed, the 'local Taliban,' and TNSM, demanded the release of TNSM leader Sufi Mohammed saying that:

"If Sufi is not released, the TNSM will conduct a suicide campaign inside Pakistan; we have over 100 suicide bombers available to strike at targets inside the country."

The tribal militants were being led by Faqir Muhammad; a senior leader of the Movement for Enforcement of Islamic Laws, which provided the ideological inspiration to the Afghan Taliban in 1990s. Faqir's group sent over 10,000 fighters into Afghanistan to fight the US forces in October 2001. His two sons and two cousins were arrested by Pakistani authorities after returning from Afghanistan.

*Faqir Muhammad was known as "**al-Zawahiri's Pakistani ally.**" His home in the village of Damadola was targeted by a joint US air-strike in January 2006 after al Qaeda senior leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was believed to have been there. Zawahiri and Faqir escaped death, but*

Abu Khabab al-Masri, the chief of al Qaeda's WMD program, and several other senior al Qaeda leaders were killed in the attack.

In October 2006, Faqir's madrassa in Chingai village of Bajaur, labelled as an al Qaeda and Taliban training camp, was hit by another US air-strike, killing 84 Taliban, including Faqir's deputy, Liaquat Hussain. Faqir had responded by attacking the Dargai military base with a suicide bomber killing tens of Pak-Army jawans.

Then Gen Musharraf's government was made to believe that those 'local Taliban' were "patriots" who could be entrusted to secure the peace inside Pakistan while preventing cross border attacks in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the Northwest Frontier Province was falling into the hands of the Taliban and al Qaeda.]

On 27th March 2007, Major Hamza, an ISI officer and Subedar Saeed were murdered in Bajaur along with two other security officials. It was a great blow to Pak-Army's peace cause. Later investigations revealed that the attack was an 'inside job' aided or carried out by certain rogue ISI officials sympathetic to al Qaeda.

In the settled district of Tank in Khyber PK, over 200 Taliban fighters attacked the town's police stations, looted and burnt two banks. The government claimed 25 Taliban and one police officer were killed, but it was not believed by the media.

The fighting in Tank began after the principal of a local high school asked police to prevent the Taliban from recruiting students for their brigades. A skirmish ensued, and the Taliban later returned and kidnapped the principal. Over 100 students were recruited by the Taliban in that single school till the attack; they kept holding positions outside the town for weeks.

After attack on Tank, the Taliban started enforcing Sharia **in Kohat**; they blew up two video shops and torched a cable operator's office in Kohat.

In Bannu, the Taliban kidnapped a female poll worker **on 30th March 2007**. The Taliban forced the local politicians to agree to nominate only male candidates in local and national elections and the militants also got them agreed that **women would not poll votes in any election**.

On 5-6th April 2007; *Jamia Hafsa* held a conference at **Lal Masjid**, where the Islamic leadership finalised a strategy against brothels and gambling dens

and the drive was settled to be spread in adjacent districts also.

As the crisis in Islamabad city deepened, the Pakistani military was stuck by a suicide attack. Two recruits were killed and 8 wounded when a suicide bomber walked up to trainees outside a military base in **Kharian** [*the HQ of an army corps where mechanized infantry, armour and artillery were normally stationed*].

On 14th April 2010; as many as 736 prisoners undergoing jail terms in various prisons of the Punjab were freed while 3,238 convicts benefited from the special remission granted by President Zardari to celebrate the success of the 18th Amendment. In Rawalpindi region only, 215 convicts were freed while 610 were benefited, including Ahmad Riaz Sheikh, former Additional DG FIA - 167 prisoners were released from Adiala Jail.

The main provision for celebration of the passing of 18th Amendment for the Pakistan's Constitution was that ***'the political parties are not bound to hold elections within'***; meaning thereby that the future prime ministers in Pakistan would not go out of Zardaris, Sharifs, Chaudhrys of Gujrat and JUI's Rehman families, as discussed earlier in detail.

President Zardari was delighted more but it suited most of the party leaders in Pakistan AND was a gift for Taliban because most of their prisoners were facilitated through that noble remission.

Meanwhile, a petition was filed by one Azhar Siddique Advocate in the Lahore High Court [LHC] the same day against the Punjab government for non-implementation of presidential order regarding remission in sentences of convicted prisoners – but of no avail.

In Pakistan, amendments are made in the Constitution and rules are framed to benefit some families of upper political elite and their cronies – this is called ***'Pakistani democracy'***.

11 NANGA PARBAT TOURISTS KILLED:

On 22nd June 2013; about 16 local Taliban disguised as Gilgit Scouts hiked into base camp on the Diamir side of Pakistan's 26,660 ft high Nanga Parbat, the ninth-tallest mountain on earth, shouting in English: ***"Taliban! Al Qaeda! Surrender!"***. Some fifty climbers from many different countries were on the mountain at that time, and more than a dozen were hanging out at base. The

intruders roused these mountaineers from their tents, tied them up, and forced them onto their knees at gunpoint. The attackers first demanded money. One person, the only survivor Pakistani guide told:

"We know you can speak English. Ask them who has money in their tents Everybody was scared. We all said, 'Yes, we have money.' The foreigners said, 'Yes, we have Euros. Yes, we have dollars.' And, one by one, they took climbers to their different tents and collected the money."

The intruders took hold of all currency, passports, valuables, and then destroyed all their cell phones, satellite gadgets and two-way radios etc they could find.

*"Suddenly.... sound of shootin after that moment, the shooting started in bursts. Three times like that. Then the leader said, 'Now stop firing. Don't fire anybody.' **Then he came in between the dead bodies and he personally shot them one by one.**"*

Several of the climbers pleaded, **"I am not American! I am not American!"** but to no avail. Only one of the victims was Chinese-born American; two were Chinese, three were Ukrainians, two Slovaks, one Lithuanian, and one *Sherpa* from Nepal. The cook was a Pakistani. In all, 11 people were killed. One Chinese survivor was later recovered.

The **BBC report dated 24th June 2013** told that:

'... this was at a height of 4,200m (13,779 ft) and the attackers would have had to travel for at least 18 hours by foot or by mule.

The attackers forced two local guides to take them to the base camp. Once they reached their destination, they rounded up the foreign climbers and staff, took passports and money, destroyed mobile phones, blindfolded them and forced them to kneel.

The gunmen separated and tied up the local Pakistani staff and told them not to attempt to raise the alarm until morning..... and stayed hidden on the mountainwhen a Pakistani cook came rushing down in tears saying everybody had been killed.'

The climbers were staying at a first base camp in Buner *Nallah*, around 4,200 feet from **Nanga Parbat**, one of the highest mountains in the world, in the Diamer district of Gilgit - Baltistan. The area where the incident occurred was

unmanned and at a distance of two days track from Chilas. Gunmen came and opened fire killing all of them. The Himalayas in northern Pakistan offer some of the most spectacular climbing in the world. Its peaks are a magnet for experienced mountaineers, often from Europe.

The *Tehreek e Taliban* Pakistan [TTP] claimed responsibility for the killings confirming that because of the killing of their front rank leader Waliur Rehman **on 30th May 2013** in US drone attack brought them to avenge and retaliate. Waliur Rehman was buried within hours after he was killed.

[Later reports confirmed that the terrorists had planned to kidnap Chen Honglu, the dual Chinese-American citizen, to trade him for a Taliban commander in Afghanistan. As the attack unfolded in the Nanga Parbat base camp, Chen burst out of his tent and tackled one of the militants using martial arts techniques.

The militant, named Mujeeb, panicked and shot him, destroying the main purpose of the mission and infuriating the terrorist commanders. The remaining climbers were then tied up and shot. The attackers then walked for five hours to a remote village where they buried their uniforms and had breakfast before a walking on to another village and dispersing.]

The TTP had, at the same time, withdrawn its offer for peace talks which were then under negotiation with newly saddled PML[N] government.

The Taliban also announced that it would take revenge of their leader's death by getting even with the government and military establishment key members. TTP spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan said in a statement:

"We announce an end to our peace overtures because we believe that the Pakistani government is equally involved in the drone attack. The death of Waliur Rehman, our deputy chief and our commander in-charge for South Waziristan, would not dampen our spirit but would add to our determination."

The US attack had evoked a strong reaction all over Pakistan and Imran Khan, the Chief of the PTI, called incoming Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to either get drone attacks stopped or decide to shoot them down.

In the past, Nawaz Sharif had been advocating peace talks with the Taliban and he publicly criticised US drone strike that killed Taliban Deputy Waliur Rehman echoing that the US drone campaign violated national sovereign-

ty.

While Gilgit-Baltistan had seen deadly sectarian violence targeting Shiite community, foreigners had never before been targeted in such a remote part of the region - inaccessible by road. Helicopters were dispatched to recover the bodies with police and paramilitary force. Remnants of horrific attacks were apparent as the media men drove through Chilas had also seen three burnt up buses abandoned on a road side.

Later it was revealed that the attackers were dressed up as Gilgit Scouts, a paramilitary police unit, and accessed the camp with the help of two guides whom they kidnapped. One guide was killed in the shoot-out.

Needless to say, this attack on the expedition team was purposefully launched to cause a significant setback for Pakistan's tourism industry. Trekking companies were reported cancellations from groups scheduled to arrive later in the season. Even after post-9/11 attacks, about 5,000 resilient adventurers continued to travel and mettle against the monstrous peaks in the Himalayan and Karakoram ranges including the K2, the second highest mountain in the world.

After that episode of brutal murders, local economy came to stand still. Immediately after, the government suspended all mountaineering expeditions on Nanga Parbat and around – another blow for the poor people. The government should have made plans to tackle the terror menace instead of cancellation of expeditions.

On 26th June 2013; sixteen terrorists involved in the said cold blooded murder of 10 foreign trekkers and their Pakistani guide were identified; Gilgit police Chief Usman Zakaria claimed. They were all locals... 10 of them were residents of Diamer Valley; three belonged to Mansehra and another three from Kohistan. It was a major breakthrough ... also telling that the assailants had received training in FATA and had links with some banned outfits. Four of them were arrested on 22nd July.

The development was achieved through Diamer jirga which had extended all possible help in identifying the accused; the attackers were then hiding somewhere in the valley.

On 7th August 2013; the new *Jandul Hafsa faction* of the outlawed TTP killed three security officials who were investigating the Nanga Parbat massacre. Gunmen opened fire on the officers' vehicle in Chilas in the Diamer district while it was on their way from the Deputy Commissioner House to their rest house. The officials who were killed included Superintendent of Police [SP] Hilal Ahmed, who was driving the vehicle, Capt Ashfaq Aziz

and Col Ghulam Mustafa. The later two belonged to the Pakistan Army and were responsible for the internal security of the district.

*[But many questions remained unanswered. If the **Jundul Hafsa** had struck to avenge the American drone strikes, why did they so readily kill non-Americans, even Chinese? Some speculated that the killers intended to disrupt the political bond between Pakistan and China, jointly planning a major dam project in the Diamir region.*

*There were strong indications, too, that the **Jundul Hafsa**, or allied factions of the TTP, were responsible for two attacks on buses in the Gilgit region in February 2012, in which almost sixty Shia were systematically identified and executed.]*

The death of army officials prompted the Pakistan Army to enter the district for the first time since the incident. The army conducted a targeted operation in four places in Chilas while the entry and exit points to the town were sealed and Army Aviation helicopters hovered above. The operations lasted till late evening of 11th August 2013.

Till **19th August 2013**; all 20 of the men reportedly behind the Nanga Parbat attack were arrested which were subsequently released except FIVE till June 2014. According to one Bashir Qureshi, a member of the negotiating team assigned to bring the culprits out of hiding; there were many grey areas in the case. Qureshi opined that:

"Nothing is clear, they have mixed up four different cases to give an impression that all the perpetrators have been arrested but the real perpetrators are still at large."

The attackers had gained access to this remote location by abducting two guides; one Pakistani and one Nepalese named Sona Sherpa. The Nepalese guide was also killed during the shootout.

On 27th February 2015; four inmates made a successful attempt to escape the Gilgit district jail. Of the two who managed to flee, one was allegedly involved in the Nanga Parbat tourist shooting incident. Security agencies started an operation to capture the escapees but could not succeed.

US-TTP TALKS IN DOHA FAILED:

After nearly 12 years of death and destruction, the Taliban and the US were to hold talks on finding a political solution to end the war in Afghanistan. Referring to the American **FP magazine** dated **18th June 2013**:

"The Obama administration was convinced that a Taliban office be opened in the Qatari capital of Doha – taking it as the first step towards ultimate US-Afghan goal of full Taliban renouncement of links with al Qaida. Formal meetings were scheduled to begin within days [of course, with flexible agenda]."

The decision was a reversal of months of failed efforts to start peace talks while Taliban militants intensified a campaign targeting urban centres and government installations in the two countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In academics, the Taliban group used to oppose the use of Afghan soil to threaten other countries and supported the negotiating process; posing on two key demands of both the US and Afghan governments before talks could begin. The deputy foreign minister of Qatar had confirmed that the Emir of the Gulf States had given the go ahead for the office to open.

The Taliban were willing to use all legal means to end what they called the **occupation of Afghanistan**. The US and Taliban representatives were going to hold bilateral meetings, and Afghan president Hamid Karzai's High Peace Council was expected to follow up with its own talks a few days later. Both the US and the Taliban acknowledged that the process would be **"complex, long and messy"** because of the then ongoing level of distrust between the parties.

Taliban had for years refused to speak to governments or the Peace Council, set up by Mr Karzai three years ago, because they considered them to be American puppets. Taliban representatives instead talked to American and other Western officials in Doha and other places, mostly in Europe.

The said announcements had come on the day that Afghan forces took the lead from the NATO coalition for security nationwide, opening the way for the full withdrawal of most foreign troops in 18 months; till December 2014 then. However, one US administration official said during a morning conference call with reporters. **"....So we're at the beginning of a difficult road... I wouldn't be looking for early results."**

The whole world, specifically the US and Afghanistan, were soon disappointed because just after three weeks, the said **Taliban Office in Doha was closed before formal talks could take start** – on the charges of **'broken prom-**

ises' from Taliban leadership.

Daily '*Al Jazeera*' dated **10th July 2013** informed the inside story to all.

The office opened on 18th June 2013 as the first move towards a possible peace deal after 12-years of fighting, but it enraged Afghan President Hamid Karzai who declared it as an ***unofficial embassy for [Afghan Taliban] government-in-exile.***

A Pakistan-based Taliban official said:

"We have temporarily closed the Qatar office due to broken promises. We are not happy with the Americans, the Kabul government and all parties who have not been honest with us."

Karzai broke off bilateral talks with the Americans and threatened to boycott any peace process altogether after the Taliban opened the offices with a flag-raising ceremony for the ***"Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan"*** - the name of the country under Taliban rule.

The latest setback came as Afghan officials said a Taliban-planted bomb in the western province of Herat killed 17 civilians, the roadside bomb in Herat killed 12 women, four children and one man travelling in a three-wheel minivan; at least seven other passengers were wounded.

An Afghan soldier also shot dead a Slovakian soldier at Kandahar airfield. The Slovakian government confirmed that one Slovak soldier was killed and six were injured when an Afghan soldier opened fire in the latest *"insider attack"* to shake the NATO coalition.

Meanwhile, the US government was seriously considering speeding up the withdrawal of its forces because of frustration with Karzai. The US President, Barack Obama, was committed to ending the US military involvement in Afghanistan by the end of 2014, though his administration has been negotiating with Kabul about leaving behind a *'residual force'*.

[In August 2015; head of the Taliban office in Qatar, Tayeb Agha, resigned citing *"internal factional struggles to seize control of the leadership."* Indeed, he did so after learning that the Taliban leader Mullah Omar was no more alive; had passed away in 2013. Learning of the power vacuum that was created by Mullah Omar's death, Agha departed arguing that all sides of the Taliban should

regulate their affairs from inside Afghanistan.

In March 2016; *Taliban refused to engage in talks with Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, and the US; calling such discussions as futile.*

In April 2016; *members of Taliban in Qatar issued a statement denying media reports that the Taliban was exploring the possibility of peace talks with the Afghan government.*

*According to Taliban officials in Qatar, **the Taliban were not entertaining peace negotiations at this time.** Rather, the group was focused on the release of Taliban prisoners as well as issues along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.]*

Thus the matter stands dead since then & hopefully once for all.

PESHAWAR APS MASSACRE [2014]:

On 16th December 2014, 153 people, more than 134 of them children, were killed in Peshawar when the Pakistani Taliban launched an attack at the Army Public School [APS]. Seven attackers, dressed in army uniform, mounted assault on the school at about 10.30am; hundreds were attending the school at that time. Many children escaped but some were held hostage hours after the initial assault.

The militants affiliated with *Tehrik e Taliban* [TTP], all of whom were foreign nationals, included one Chechen, three Arabs and two Afghans, entered the school and opened fire on school staff and children ranging between eight and eighteen years of age. A rescue operation was launched by the Pakistan Army's Special Services Group [SSG] which killed all the seven terrorists and rescued 960 people. About 130 people were also injured in the said attack. It was the deadliest terrorist attack ever to occur in the country after Karachi bombing of October 2007.

The later version told that the attackers were not seven rather many more.

*[Earlier, in the same city of Peshawar, **on 28th October 2009,** 137 people, mainly women and children, were slaughtered in Peshawar's Meena Bazaar in a brutal militant attack by the Taliban.*

On 22nd September 2013; *the militants linked to the Taliban had*

killed at least 80 people at a church in Peshawar, in one of the worst attacks on Christians.]

The militants had entered the school building from the back through a cemetery after having scaled the boundary walls. Army Public School is located at Warsak Road near the Peshawar Cantonment area. Before entering the school, the gunmen set fire to the Suzuki van in which they had arrived there.

The terrorists, bearing automatic weapons, moved straight towards the auditorium located at the centre of the complex and opened fire indiscriminately on the children who were gathered there for First Aid training. They wanted to kill as many pupils as they could. As the terrorists opened fire, many of the pupils ran towards the two exits on the other side of the auditorium, but many of them were gunned down in the garden.

The students were forced to watch teachers, including Principal Tahira Qazi, to be killed in front of them. Within 15 minutes, the SSG teams reached there and entered the premises from two sides in their heavy armoured vehicles and trucks; engaged the terrorists, preventing them from chasing the remaining school staff and students. The gunmen moved to the administration block where one of them was shot by the military personnel while the other six managed to take hostage there.

Meanwhile units of the Army Medical Corps were rushed to the school in armoured vehicles whereas Army Corps of Military Police and the Peshawar civilian police cordoned off the school and blocked the potential escape routes for the armed militants.

A fresh contingent of the SSG commandos then reached there and surrounded the administration block where the terrorists were hiding inside with hostages. During the rescue operation there, three of the six attackers were killed by the army snipers from the windows and air vents, while the other three were killed when the commandos stormed the building at last. Seven SSG commandos, including two officers, were injured in the battle.

The terrorists were in contact with their handlers during the attack, but soon after the SSG had moved in, the security forces intercepted the terrorists' communications. The SSG team were able to identify that who they were and with whom they were in contact with but did not share the information with any due to security reasons.

The TTP claimed responsibility for the attack, describing it as revenge for Operation **Zarb e Azb**, the Pakistani military's offensive in North Waziristan that had taken start in June 2014 with full force. TTP spokesman Omar Khoras-

ani told the media on phone that:

'We targeted the school because the Army targets our families. We want them to feel our pain. We identified more than 50 sons of important army officers and killed them after.'

The attacks were mainly coordinated by TTP leaders operating in Afghanistan. Early investigations revealed that the group was led by the terrorist, Abu Shamil who planned the attacks, accompanied by three Arabs and two Pashto speaking Afghans from Eastern Afghanistan.

The BBC dated **16th December 2014**, while describing the above sad incident rightly pointed out that:

"This brutal attack may well be a watershed for country long accused by the world of treating terrorists as strategic assets.

*Pakistan's policy-makers struggling to come to grips with various shades of militants have often cited a 'lack of consensus' and **'large pockets of sympathy' for religious militants** as a major stumbling-block.*

*That is why, for Gen Raheel Sharif's indiscriminate operation earlier in the year against militant groups in Pakistan, **the political response was lukewarm at best.***

*We will get them, was his message, be they Pakistani Taliban, Punjabi Taliban, al-Qaeda and affiliates, or most importantly, the dreaded Haqqani network. **But the country's political leadership chose to remain largely silent.**"*

During the month of November 2014, 35 attacks in Pakistan were carried out in total; out of which 32 were carried out by the Pakistan Taliban [TTP] killing 143 people; 13 were carried out in the Khyber PK province only.

On 18th December 2014; a video was released by TTP on their website showing one *Umar Mansour* revealing that he, in association with one Saddam Jan, was the mastermind behind the Peshawar School attack. He was instructed by Maulana Fazlullah, a perspective new Chief of the TTP having his bases in two provinces of Afghanistan; Kunnar & Nuristan.

On 26th December 2014; Saddam Jan was hunted and killed by the Special Forces in Khyber Agency; six other high value targets were also gunned down

with him. The Pakistani intelligence community conducted an investigation to determine the nationalities of the terrorists, whom the FIA determined were all foreign fighters. The identities of six gunmen were released:

- Abu Shamil (also known as Abdur Rehman) — Chechen fighter and thought to be the ringleader of the group.
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- Nouman Shah Helmand — an Afghan citizen from Helmand Province; the US had placed a \$500,000 bounty upon Shah.
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- Wazir Alam Herat — an Afghan citizen from Herat.
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- Khatib al-Zubaidi — an Arabic speaker and an Egyptian citizen.
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- Mohammad Zahedi — an Arabic speaker and a Moroccan citizen.
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- Jibrán al-Saeedi — an Arab of unknown nationality.

The SIM card of the cell phone that was used by the terrorists was found to be registered to a woman belonging to the rural area of Hasilpur Punjab.

The attack sparked widespread reactions in Pakistan, receiving condemnations from public, government institutions, political and religious entities, journalists, and other members of Pakistani society. Pakistani media reacted strongly to the events, with major newspapers, news channels and many commentators calling for renewed and strong action against militants, especially against the exploiters of religion like TTP.

International reaction to the attack was also widespread, with many countries and international organizations condemning the attack and expressing their condolences to the families of the victims. Calling it a national tragedy the government announced a 3-day mourning period during which the National Flag remained at half mast.

Major Pakistani political entities denounced and heavily condemned the attack on innocent children, calling for a strong reaction against the militants. Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai condemned the attack, saying in a statement: *"I am heartbroken by this senseless and cold-blooded act of terror in Peshawar that is unfolding before us"*.

Even the terrorist organization *al-Qaeda's* spokesperson said that ***"Our hearts are bursting with pain and that the soldiers should be targeted, not their children"***.

After the Peshawar event, Pakistani authorities immediately launched crack-downs on Afghan refugee settlements around Islamabad and Peshawar to apprehend illegal immigrants. During the period, at least 30,000 Afghans left for Afghanistan voluntarily; about 2000 were deported due to lack of legal documentation with them.

Many international media organisations referred to the attack as Pakistan's "9/11". The popular opinion was one of anger against the TTP soon after the attacks. Pakistan Government and its Armed Forces showed immediate reaction to the incident. The Iranian-American scholar, Vali Nasr opined:

"The Taliban may be trying to slacken the resolve of the [Pakistan's] military by suggesting that there could be a tremendous human costs to the military offensive and create public pressure on the military to back off from this offensive [in North Waziristan], but it may actually ricochet on them."

Protesters in Islamabad surrounded a pro-Taliban mosque, '**Lal Masjid**' and reclaimed the space. A series of candle vigils were held throughout Pakistan in solidarity with the victims. **"We want to reclaim our mosques, our communities, our cities, indeed our entire country from extremists,"** the mob held the promise.

Maulana Abdul Aziz, the head cleric of **Lal Masjid** [Red Mosque], refused to condemn the Peshawar massacre, calling it an understandable response to a six-month Pakistani military drive against armed groups associated with Taliban. In response, Pakistanis gathered protesting outside **Lal Masjid**, and held a candle-lit vigil for the victims and wrote the names of those killed on a white board while speaking against extremism – that:

"Some people are acting like spokespersons for the enemy and openly telling the world that they support militancy and organizations like TTP & ISIL. We must stand up against them."

The liberal political party *Muttahida Qaumi Movement* [MQM] lodged a police complaint against Maulana Aziz for his statement after protesters called him a Taliban apologist, Pakistani media had reported. However, two days later, Maulana Aziz gave into pressure and apologized for failing to unconditionally condemn the Peshawar attack by the TTP.

On 30th December 2014, Pakistani cricket star Younis Khan visited the Peshawar school to hand over cricket kits and a cheque sent by the New Zealand cricket team, as a good gesture for the students of the APS. ISPR released a song, ***bara dushman bana phirta hai jo bachon se larta hai***,

[what kind of the enemy is who preferred to fight with the children], a special tribute to the innocent victims.

The APS Peshawar reopened on **12th January 2015** under the guard of Pakistan's security forces. To uplift the morale and spirit of the students and victims of school the Chief of Army Staff Gen Raheel Sharif himself attended the morning assembly of the school and confirmed them that no such incident would ever occur in Pakistan again and ***'they [the Pak-Army] will break the backbone of Taliban'***.

After two days of Peshawar attack, there was also a terrorist blast in Dera Ghazi Khan's school. But fortunately, no one was there. Hence, after that, all the Educational Institutions got closed for three weeks under the government instructions, just to recollect the morale of the kids and students.

BAN ON EXECUTIONS LIFTED:

On 17th December 2014, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif approved paperwork to remove the moratorium on the death penalty in terror-related cases after which one Mohammed Aqeel along with Arshad Mehmood, the convicted for a failed assassination attempt on the former President, Gen Musharraf, were executed on 19th December 2014.

Pakistan had a moratorium on executions since 2008. Till July 2013, there were about 8000 people on death row in Pakistan in terrorism related cases. The move came following the ***widely held perception that terrorists had never been brought to justice in Pakistan.***

Many times, the judges and witnesses were too scared to come forward and award due sentences to the terrorists. And even when the terrorists were convicted and sent to prison, there were seen jailbreaks, including the Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan jails, in which many high profile terrorists were got escaped by their fellow TTP members.

In 2008, when the PPP government had agreed to follow the EU convention to shun the practice of death penalty, it was the fifth highest executing country in the world; Pakistan ranked fifth [total cases] after the People's Republic of China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States. The moratorium expired on 30th June 2013 and the government announced it had no plan to extend it but despite the tall announcements, the decision was not implemented in fact.

The PML[N] government stated there would be no general amnesty for the convicts waiting for execution but remained confined to lip-service. After the APS massacre, the prime minister had to take immediate decision. The heavily funded NGOs concerning Human Rights in Pakistan and the Amnesty International opposed the decision, raising much hue and cry but the PML[N] government gave deaf ears to them.

On 19th December 2014; the Islamabad police stopped protesters from gathering at the Red Mosque at *Juma* prayer time and asked them to protest a short distance away, while activists of the banned anti-Shiite groups were allowed to rally in support of the mosque and its clerics. Across Karachi, mosques affiliated with *Jamaat-ud-Dawa* blamed India for the Peshawar massacre in their Friday sermons. It was considered to de-track the sentiments of the general populace only.

The tide of outrage encouraged progressive Pakistanis, increasingly marginalized for years, to speak up. Outside the Red Mosque after Friday prayers, protesters waved placards mocking Maulana Abdul Aziz: "**Run, burqa, run**" read one sign, in a reference to Maulana's attempt to slip through a military cordon in 2007 while disguised in a woman's concealing garments.

"The Red Mosque has become a factory of terror and hatred," said Bushra Gohar of the Awami National Party [ANP].

Referring to the '**New York Times**' of **19th December 2015**:

'The Red Mosque seemed a nearly untouchable bastion of Islamist extremism in Pakistan. On Friday evening, though, the tables were turned when hundreds of angry protesters stood at the mosque gates and howled insults at the chief cleric

But the debate on militancy in upper forums was dominated by bigoted and conspiracy-laden voices, like those of the clerics of the Red Mosque, [and of JUI(F) & JI leadership].'

It was because the sitting government of the PML[N] and their allied politico - religious parties had still no serious intensions to initiate stern action against the Talibans. Punjab's Law Minister Rana Sanaullah was openly criticised in media for allegedly patronizing the Taliban groups in the province.

This was the time when the Pakistanis united by grief, rage and political necessity, from across society raised their voice with unusual force and clarity

about the militant threat that disfigured their society.

For the first time, religious parties and ultra-conservative politicians felt forced to publicly shun the Taliban movement by name. And the demonstrations against militancy touched several cities in Pakistan, including a gathering of students outside the school in Peshawar. Protest leaders believed that the public would support them.

"This will become a protest movement against the Taliban," one organizer thundered into a microphone outside the Red Mosque. Though there was little doubt that the Peshawar massacre had galvanized Pakistani society, the question was whether it could become a real turning point for a society plagued by violent divisions and culture wars amongst them.

The country had suffered countless wrenching tragedies and political assassinations, as well as attacks on mosques, markets and churches — only for rage to fizzle into nothing. And after the Taliban attack on the teenage Malala Yousafzai, Western support for the cause made her the target of smears and vitriolic criticism.

In fact the whole Pakistani populace was standing by the government decision. Referring to **'the guardian'** dated **21st December 2014:**

'There is a palpable sense of grief in Pakistan. There was an odd stillness on Wednesday morning, as the reality of what had happened in Peshawar began to sink in. Not since the assassination of the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 2007 has there been such a visible and widespread display of despair and anger.'

'In Karachi, the blare of the city and its 20 million citizens seemed to have been silenced by sadness; all shops and markets were shuttered down immediately after the news break.'

'All supporters of the Taliban are bastards,' stated a banner strung up in Rahim Yar Khan. In Islamabad, the protests against the Red Mosque armrd brigades were a powerful indication that Pakistanis were tired of tolerating those who refused to condemn militancy.

For foreign media, it was ridiculous that so huge protests were coming up only after years of assassinations, bombings and mass executions by the Taliban and militant groups such as the *Lashkar e Jhangvi* [LeJ]. For years, terrorist attacks had been justified by their perpetrators and their supporters, on the grounds that their targets were apostates or that they were justified to enact

revenge; or over drone attacks or because they were America's allies.

The scenes in Peshawar – bloodied classrooms, described as a 'crawl through a nightmare'; dozens of coffins had united Pakistani people to finish the menace once for all.

It was a turning point in Pakistan and called for a consensus on how to act against militants.

The UK's leading newspaper '**the guardian**' referred above commented:

'[Astonishingly]..... Pakistan with blinkers on, ignore[d] the fundraising posters put up by groups such as the Hafiz Saeed-led Jamaat-ud-Dawa, believed to be a cover for Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Easier to ignore the neighbourhood cleric railing against religious minorities, or the sight of Shia protesters refusing to bury their dead, killed in mass executions at the hands of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi [in Quetta]. And, finally, easier to ignorethe clerics who have helped shape irreversible divides in society.'

The murder of 136 children plus 17 staff members forced many to take their blinkers off, mourned and cried for some days, then again resigned into putting them back on, because the Pakistan's political elite preferred to protect all hard-line clerics, mostly supported by JUIs and JIs.

21ST AMEND'T & NATIONAL ACTION PLAN:

PM Nawaz Sharif had to feel the sense when he vowed that '**this time will be different**'. He rushed to Peshawar; as global scrutiny intensified, PM Sharif immediately declared, sworn and determined to eliminate the distinction between "**good and bad Talibans**".

[One could recall the visit of Hillary Clinton, the then US Foreign Secretary, to Islamabad in 2011 when she had said:

"You can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbours [and not your kids and family members.]"

The army, for its part, had been buoyed by a wave of public sympathy, as

many of the children killed at the Army Public School in Peshawar belonged to military families. And political forces, such as the MQM, blew their trumpets even higher because they wanted to balance their old scores in Karachi. **"Crush Taliban to Save Pakistan,"** the banners were openly seen in Karachi those days and the people had hailed them in general.

Even then, many were sceptical that the anger and tears of that week could make a sustained change in Pakistan. Civil society was still weak and disorganized; raven by fear of the Taliban and the harsh gaze of the sectarian factions. One foreign media guru based in Islamabad commented that:

"I don't see a joining up of the dots across the country. There isn't the infrastructure, the will, the people with organization, ability and visibility to lead it.

The wave of anti-Taliban sentiment is probably just a blip; quite honestly, give it a month and it will have faded."

And the prophecy appeared up as a bitter truth.

To dispel many wrong and maliciously propagated American theories, mainly that the Pakistani military would not disband groups like *Lashkar e Taiba*, the political and military leadership in Pakistan joined hands to make out **21st Amendment in the Constitution** just within three weeks of the Peshawar episode. The Pak-Army had the statistics and intelligence reports about the underground ties between militant groups — which often shared ideas, fighters and weapons — and had undermined army efforts to dismantle the Pakistani Taliban.

The only worry then was that once anger was over; the Peshawar massacre dissipated, the debate over militancy would once again be clouded in confusion and obfuscation — some years back, offers to negotiate with Taliban had provided them opportunities to strike back more vigorously. However, hats off to the army team leader Gen Raheel Sharif that he did not let the politicians to waste that prospect.

In fact the calls to avenge Peshawar massacre were loud and could not be ignored. The Pakistani government lifted unofficial moratorium on the death penalty; coupled with this, they resolved to establish the summary trial / military courts to hang terrorists. Also determined that the process should be put on track immediately but through a political consensus — thus decided to call all parties conference on the subject.

Hanging terrorists was not going to atone for the fact that more than 143 children went to school one morning and came home in coffins that evening. For that, the Pakistani leadership had to go as brave as the students who went back to their bloodied school and resumed their education as usual – so a call for the All Parties Conference was announced and the office hands of the GHQ and PM House worked out the blue-prints of the National Action Plan [NAP].

Following up Abbas Nasir [*Dawn* dated **27th December 2014** is referred]; even if the resolve to finally tackle terrorism through NAP was military-led, that reason was not enough to doubt or reject it. Because for long, many believed that since this particular form of *jihad*, or for that matter the Taliban Doctrine, was originated allegedly in Saudi-funded laboratory jointly run by CIA-ISI, the genie could only be put back in the bottle by the Pak-Army more effectively.

More so because the international partners, who helped midwife this ideology, were lacking in desire because of their own regional interests. Lucky enough, Pakistan's army leadership emerged in 2013-14, did not appear plagued by regional compromises, thus the things started going towards pure nationalism.

Pakistani junta had heard the '**good Taliban - bad Taliban**' mantra for years. This scepticism was also in evidence at the meeting in the Parliamentary Committee that week at the PM's House where the army chief on hearing the narrative from the civilian leadership about the past duality of approach reportedly said '**bury the past, now it's different**'.

From most accounts of the meeting, the participants were clearly apprised with every assurance that each militant group would be dealt with even-handedly and the ban on outlawed groups be enforced and a mere name change won't enable such entities to operate as before. Thus, on a serious note NAP was a sensible document.

[Under NAP and through 21st Amendment, the military courts would function for two years.

If this time could be used to initiate and complete a root and branch reform in the judiciary; passing of laws that allow judges to hear evidence from behind screens in terrorism cases and video-link testimonies etc then perhaps the respite won by speedy dispensation of justice via military courts would be worth mention in the contemporary history of Pakistan.]