

Taliban Besiege Pakistan School, Leaving 145 Dead

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LONDON — First the Pakistani Taliban bombed or burned over 1,000 schools. Then they shot Malala Yousafzai, the teenage advocate for girls' rights.

But on Tuesday, the Taliban took their war on education to a ruthless new low with an assault on a crowded school in Peshawar that killed 145 people — 132 of them uniformed schoolchildren — in the deadliest single attack in the group's history.

During an eight-hour rampage at the Army Public School and Degree College, a team of nine Taliban gunmen stormed through the corridors and assembly hall, firing at random and throwing grenades. Some of the 1,100 students at the school were lined up and slaughtered with shots to the head. Others were gunned down as they cowered under their desks, or forced to watch as their teachers were riddled with bullets.

Their parents crowded around the school gates, praying their children would survive while listening to the explosions and gunfire as Pakistani commandos stormed the building.

With its chilling echoes of a school in Beslan, Russia, where 186 children were massacred in 2004, the terrorist attack in Peshawar traumatized a scarred city that has suffered intense Taliban violence since the insurgency erupted seven years ago. By evening, mosques were filled with mourners carrying small wooden coffins, and residents cried openly in the streets.

A Taliban spokesman said the attack had been retaliation for the continuing military operation against the group in the North Waziristan tribal region. But the image of children's bodies on the floor of their school auditorium, some of them not yet in their teens, again demonstrated how the Pakistani Taliban's war has often been taken out on the country's most vulnerable citizens.

Even other militant groups felt obliged to comment, though perhaps cynically. A spokesman for the Afghan Taliban, who have pushed civilian casualties in Afghanistan to a new high in the past year, posted a Twitter message criticizing the attack as un-Islamic and expressing shared pain with the victims' families.

Witnesses in Peshawar said the assault started around 10 a.m., when nine heavily armed militants, disguised in paramilitary uniforms, slipped through a military graveyard and leapt over the back wall of the Army Public School. They rushed through the main building, shooting and flinging grenades before reaching the auditorium. There, according to one Pakistani official, a senior army official was giving a first aid course.

First they sprayed the students with bullets; then they singled out the survivors. "Our instructor asked us to duck and lie down," a student named Zeeshan said in an interview

at the hospital. “Then I saw militants walking past rows of students, shooting them in the head.”

Elsewhere in the school, teachers, realizing what was going on, abruptly canceled classes and exams and tried to protect their charges, who ranged in age from roughly 5 to 17. A 7-year-old named Afaq broke down as he described how the militants sprayed bullets as they rushed into his classroom. “They killed our teacher,” he said, his eyes welling with tears.

Although early assessments suggested that the gunmen had been intent on mounting a long siege — some were carrying stores of food, it was later discovered — a senior security official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, insisted that they had shown no intention of taking hostages. “They were there to kill, and this is what they did,” he said.

The school turned into a battleground when commandos from the army’s elite Special Services Group moved in. As the battle for control spread across the school, cornered militants detonated their suicide vests, causing loud blasts that rang across the city. Some attackers appeared to be speaking in Arabic, others in Pashto, survivors later reported.

Some students managed to flee, running from the school in their uniforms of green sweaters and blazers. Desperate relatives rushed to local hospitals or gathered outside the school gates, seeking news of their children.

One man, Muhammad Arshad, sighed with relief after soldiers rescued his son Ehsan. “I am thankful to God for giving him a second life,” he said.

Others never made it. Later in the evening, parents clustered around a list of the dead posted outside Lady Reading Hospital.

As the fighting raged, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif reached Peshawar, where he called an emergency meeting of all political parties for Wednesday. “This is a time for us to show unanimity to root out militancy,” said Ishaq Dar, the federal finance minister.

The siege capped a particularly turbulent year in Pakistan. The polio virus has spread from the tribal belt into the most populous city, Karachi, aided by militant attacks on health workers giving vaccines. Political feuding has brought the government, and at times the country’s major cities, to a standstill.

Experts say the North Waziristan offensive of the past summer has scattered militants and loosened their grip on part of the tribal belt. But even that success has come with caveats. The fighting sent more than a million civilians fleeing in a country already awash with internally displaced people. And many militant cells are reported to have merely moved to neighboring districts, or on the other side of the border with Afghanistan.

It offered some relief to citizens that the Pakistani Taliban had, for the most part, failed to deliver the revenge they had threatened when the military offensive began in June. Now, after Tuesday's school massacre, even that hope has disappeared.

Muhammad Khurasani, the Taliban spokesman, said the militants had targeted the Army Public School because it caters to the sons and daughters of serving army personnel, although some civilian pupils also attend.

“Our shura decided to target these enemies of Islam right in their homes so they can feel the pain of losing their children,” Mr. Khurasani said in a phone interview.

Militancy experts said the attack showed that, despite several major schisms this year, the Taliban remain a force to be reckoned with.

“They want to undermine the Pakistani military's plan by going after the middle class and their resolve,” said Vali Nasr, dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and a former Obama administration official. “They want to tell the public that the Taliban can hit them, and hit them hard, and that the military can't do anything about it.”

Globally, the attack generated a wave of opprobrium outstripping even the one that followed the attack by a Taliban gunman on Ms. Yousafzai in October 2012. She survived and last week became the youngest-ever recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

“I am heartbroken by this senseless and coldblooded act of terror,” Ms. Yousafzai said in a statement on Tuesday. “I, along with millions of others around the world, mourn these children, my brothers and sisters — but we will never be defeated.”

Her condemnation was echoed by leaders of the United Nations, Britain, the United States and other countries. In Pakistan, peace activists held candlelight vigils while others vented their emotions on social media.

“Blood has been boiling and heart has been crying all day,” wrote Veena Malik Khan, a popular television celebrity, in a Twitter post that described the attackers as “animals.” One newspaper turned its website from color to black and white.

Yet the statements of solidarity and defiance masked an awkward reality. While Pakistan has suffered many bloody atrocities before, the country's leaders have yet to find a solution to the Taliban insurgency.

Critics say it is partly the leaders' own fault: The military continues to support the “good Taliban” — select militant groups that share its strategic goals in India and Afghanistan — while the political leadership is often reluctant to criticize the militants openly.

As the bodies piled up in Peshawar, some dared to wonder if this atrocity would be a turning point.

Imran Khan — the former cricketer whose P.T.I. party governs in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province, of which Peshawar is the capital — has often been criticized for being sympathetic to the Taliban, refusing to criticize them by name and continuing to advocate peace talks over the current military offensive.

But on Tuesday, he openly condemned the Taliban, saying he had been shocked by the violence against students. “Fight with men, not innocent children,” he said.

Meanwhile, soldiers cleared the last of the school’s four blocks. The principal, Tahira Qazi, was among the dead.

At a city hospital, staffers laid out a row of children’s bodies as armed guards stood over a pile of small wooden coffins.