

Lahore (Pakistan) Easter suicide bombing: A Taliban faction kills more than 80 in a public park. Christians targeted. Many children lost life

Monday 28 March 2016, by [BURKE Jason](#), [SHAH Bina](#), [SIDDIQUI Taha](#) (Date first published: 28 March 2016).

Contents

- [Lahore park bombing: authorities](#)
- [Lahore bombing is faction's](#)
- [Religious extremists will](#)

Lahore park bombing: authorities search for militants behind attack that killed more than 70

Pakistani Taliban faction Jamaat ul-Ahrar says Christians were target of bomb that killed 72 and injured 280 in park thronged with families

Pakistani authorities were on Monday searching for fighters from a Taliban militant faction that claimed responsibility for the Easter suicide bombing of a public park in Lahore that killed at least 72 people, many of whom were thought to be children.

Many of the injured were said to be in a critical condition.

The bomber blew himself up near an entrance to Gulshan-e- Iqbal Park, close to a children's play area on Sunday evening. The sound of the explosion was heard several kilometres away and eyewitnesses said there were big crowds in the area because of the Easter holiday.

"We must bring the killers of our innocent brothers, sisters and children to justice and will never allow these savage inhumans to over-run our life and liberty," military spokesman Asim Bajwa said in a post on Twitter.

A faction of the Pakistani Taliban, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, claimed responsibility for the explosion, saying it was targeted at Christians celebrating Easter. A spokesman for the group, Ehsanullah Ehsan, told the Guardian: "We have carried out this attack to target the Christians who were celebrating Easter. Also this is a message to the Pakistani prime minister that we have arrived in Punjab [the ruling party's home province]." However the Punjab government denied the claim that the bombing was aimed exclusively at Christians, as those in the park were from all backgrounds.

"I saw body parts everywhere, especially those of young children. It was quite haunting, as many of the children's rides were still operating, while there were dead bodies lying all around them," said Mohammad Ali, a student who lives nearby and went to the park after hearing the blast.

Kiran Tanveer, another local resident, said: "There was a deafening noise. I immediately thought it must be a blast. I went outside to see. I saw injured people being taken and everyone running in all directions. It was a complete chaos."

Shortly after the explosion, the area was cordoned off by law-enforcement agencies as the army and ambulances also reached the scene.

Local police said they had found one leg and the head of the suicide bomber. A police spokesman said: "He was around 23 to 25 years old. Initial reports suggest at least 20kg of explosives were used and the suicide jacket contained nuts and bolts," a police official told local media.

An emergency was declared in the city's hospitals and an appeal for blood donations made. Many family members were still looking for their loved ones late into the night.

Senior police official Haider Ashraf put the toll at 72 on Monday, saying at least eight children were among the dead, though other sources estimated that the proportion of children among the dead was much higher.

Pakistan's prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, cancelled a planned trip to the UK on Monday, where he was scheduled to stop over before heading for the US. A three-day mourning period was announced in Punjab province.

The chief of Pakistan's army, General Raheel Sharif, who is also in charge of the country's security policy, chaired a high-level meeting late on Sunday night, which was attended by the heads of the military and intelligence services.

Many Christians have accused the government of not doing enough to protect them, saying politicians are quick to offer condolences after an attack but slow to take any real steps to improve security.

The US National Security Council spokesman, Ned Price, said: "The United States condemns in the strongest terms today's appalling terrorist attack in Lahore, Pakistan. This cowardly act in what has long been a scenic and placid park has killed dozens of innocent civilians and left scores injured."

While Lahore was reeling from the attack, Islamabad, the Pakistani capital, witnessed riots erupting outside the parliament house. Supporters of Mumtaz Qadri, who was hanged last month for the murder of Punjab's governor Salman Taseer in 2011, are staging a sit-in outside the parliament and have given the Pakistani government a list of demands, the foremost of which is the immediate execution of Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman who is on death row charged with blasphemy.

Qadri, Taseer's bodyguard, shot him over the governor's call to reform the blasphemy law and his support for Aasia Bibi.

Taha Siddiqui in Islamabad

Safdar Dawar contributed reporting on this from Peshawar

* The Guardian. Sunday 27 March 2016 23.46 BST:

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/27/dozens-killed-in-blast-outside-lahore-park-pakistan>

Lahore bombing is faction's boldest bid to stake claim as Pakistan's most violent terrorists

Jamaat-ul-Ahrar has made major inroads since it was founded two years ago after a split within the fragmented Pakistan Taliban

The bombing of Lahore's most popular park is the bloodiest attempt yet by a new Islamic extremist faction to establish itself as the most aggressive and violent of the many such groups active in Pakistan.

The target was the country's long-beleaguered Christian community, according to a credible claim of responsibility from Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a group founded about two years ago after a split within the fragmented movement known as the Pakistan Taliban.

However, many Muslims were among the scores of victims when a suicide bomber detonated a nail-filled device near a children's playground. This is unlikely to bother the perpetrators.

Extremist clerics have made sustained efforts to find theological justification for such casualties in recent decades and, though such arguments are contested by mainstream scholars, they are preached in hardline mosques and taught in many religious schools in Pakistan.

The Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, like the broader Pakistan Taliban, follow an extremist branch of the rigorously conservative Deobandi strand of Islam which, along with equally intolerant schools of practice influenced by those in the Gulf, has made major inroads in Pakistan in recent years at the expense of more open-minded local traditions.

The group, based in a restive zone along Pakistan's frontier with Afghanistan, has been responsible for a string of attacks, often on government workers or religious minorities, and has explicitly said it is at war against an "unbeliever state".

It styles itself the "real" Pakistan Taliban and is opposed to a strategy of negotiations adopted by the movement's official leadership following a major assault on its strongholds launched in 2014.

This latest attack appears designed to send a clear message to local policymakers, as well as exploit anger among what appears to be a significant number of Pakistanis following the execution earlier in March of a man who in 2011 shot dead a leading politician who sought to protect Christians.

More than 100,000 people attended the funeral in Mumtaz Qadri, the killer, in the city of Rawalpindi on 1 March. Riot police used teargas to dispel protests against the execution by conservatives on Sunday.

Qadri's victim was the governor of Pakistan's Punjab province, who had called for the pardoning of a Christian woman jailed under harsh blasphemy laws. Jamaat-ul-Ahrar appear to be making a push into Punjab, Pakistan's wealthiest and most populous province which is also the power base of Nawaz Sharif, the prime minister.

The group bombed a popular ceremony at the border post of Wagah in November 2014. Punjab has

long been the fiefdom of Islamist militant groups which have relationships with Pakistani security services and usually refrain from striking within the country.

Officials from the police and other agencies in Lahore have long expressed concerns about other groups, especially those linked to the Pakistan Taliban, establishing networks in the city.

"We know they are here but don't know why they haven't attacked yet," one senior police officer said in 2013. They have now.

Jason Burke

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<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/28/lahore-bombing-is-factions-boldest-bid-to-stake-claim-as-pakistans-most-violent-terrorists>

Religious extremists will never succeed in taking over Pakistan

As long as we have our humanity, we will still remain united as Pakistanis, no matter who we choose to call our God

A week ago, on Palm Sunday, scores of Pakistani Catholics were lined up in front of a metal detector, waiting to enter St Anthony's, a small Catholic church 900 metres from Karachi's Cantonment train station. Across the road, vendors sold religious paraphernalia – crucifixes, prints of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, red and gold-spangled cloth to decorate shrines, garish reproductions of Da Vinci's Last Supper.

A lone guard stood at the door waving people through, and a volunteer scout directed the traffic. The scene illustrates how vulnerable this particular minority is to the rage of Pakistan's religious extremists, who have been trying their hardest to destroy the diversity that is so important to Pakistan's slowly growing awareness of pluralism and tolerance.

Religious minorities are an indelible part of the fabric of Pakistani society; they are represented by the white stripe on the Pakistani flag. This is echoed in the words of founding father Mohammed Ali Jinnah's most famous speech: "You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the state."

While Jinnah's message of secularism never caught on in Pakistan, religious coexistence has always had a well-defined place in the Pakistani way of life. The horrific suicide bombing in Lahore on Easter Sunday once again reminded us of the vulnerability of Pakistan's Christians, and of the fragility of coexistence.

A suicide bomber stood next to the children's rides in Gulshan-e-Iqbal Park and blew himself up, killing at last count 70 people and injuring 300, many of them Christians, most of them women and children.

The group that claimed responsibility for the bombing, the Jamaat ul-Ahrar, is a splinter group of the Pakistani Taliban. Last year they killed 15 and injured 70 in an attack on two Catholic churches in a predominantly Christian neighbourhood in Lahore.

The sights and sounds in the immediate aftermath of the attack were staggering, though sadly these apocalyptic scenes are now becoming familiar global images, in Ankara, Brussels and Iskandariya this week alone.

Women holding each other and wailing in shock, the blood of dead children staining their parents' clothes, a young man with an open head wound running into the hospital carrying a wounded child in his arms.

The Jamaat ul-Ahrar soon issued a statement: their target had been Christians celebrating Easter, although they said they never intended to hurt women or children, only Christian males. Their words belied the indiscriminate cruelty of their attack.

They also reflect the fact that the Pakistani Taliban have been weakened by the continued military operation against them in the tribal belt and in Karachi. They have now splintered into smaller groups, acting not as a cohesive unit but as lone wolves and renegades that hit soft targets like schools and parks because they can no longer reach military targets or security installations.

But jihadis are not representative of all Pakistanis. One thing to understand about Pakistan is that most of its people are socially conservative Muslims, but only a minority actually advocates and enacts violence.

The majority of Pakistanis are peaceful and would not act violently towards religious minorities even if they do not share their religious beliefs. Indeed, in times like these, Pakistanis forget about who is a Christian or a Muslim, and only think about helping the injured.

As word of the bombing spread through television and social media, people in the immediate vicinity rushed to take the wounded to hospital in their cars, taxis and rickshaws before ambulances reached the scene.

Pakistan's answer to Uber, a car service called Careem, offered free rides to anyone wanting to donate blood at the hospital. One of the most widely tweeted images was of a young doctor on call with a cannula in his arm; he was donating blood in between treating patients. People from as far away as Karachi stood ready to donate food and water to afflicted families.

Religious extremists will never succeed in taking over Pakistan, even if they maintain deadly effectiveness in spreading the virus of terrorism all over the world.

As with any epidemic, the weakest are always the ones to fall first. Yet humanity is the one thing that inoculates us against its reach. As long as we have our humanity, we will still remain united as Pakistanis, no matter who we choose to call our God.

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* The Guardian. Monday 28 March 2016 08.37 BST:

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/28/religious-extremists-will-never-succeed-in-taking-over-pakistan>

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