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# Pakistan bombing: 'Three of the people I found were alive, but they'd all lost parts of their bodies'

**Saeed Shah** in Islamabad  
The Guardian, Monday 22 September 2008



Soldiers and investigators examine the crater left by a bomb outside the Marriott hotel in Islamabad. Photograph: Faisal Mahmood/Reuters

The "face of Islamabad", the Marriott hotel, was left a charred shell yesterday, a grim testament to the war against Islamic extremists that has spilled over from Afghanistan and enveloped a bewildered Pakistan.

Pakistan's 9/11 read the headline in the News, a national daily newspaper, capturing the shock felt across the nation. The Marriott was more than just an outpost of an American chain. It was a landmark known by all in the city. Its plush restaurants and cafes were the capital's political salon, awash with intelligence agents hoping to snoop on conversations. It was where businessmen, diplomats and foreign dignitaries met. Security was believed to be so tight that it was one of only two places in Islamabad where western diplomats were allowed to dine.

The death toll stood at 53 last night, including four foreigners - two American soldiers

who worked at the American embassy, the newly arrived Czech ambassador and his Vietnamese girlfriend. Among the 266 injured were five Britons, two of whom were still in hospital and had been hurt by flying glass at a bakery about half a mile away. Their condition was not critical. Three of the Britons worked at the high commission.

The bombing, on Saturday evening, was the biggest such blast ever in Pakistan. The device was carried on a truck packed with 600kg of RDX and TNT explosives.

All of the 290 rooms seemed to have been gutted by the fire - yesterday only a concrete skeleton with a distinctive zig-zag spine remained. At least eight bodies were removed from the upper floors. The temperature had reached 400C, investigators said, which made the hotel's sprinkler system and the fire service useless. The bombers had packed aluminium powder around the explosives to accelerate the fire.

The truck bomb left a crater 59ft across and 24ft deep, cutting off the hotel entrance and hampering the rescue effort. The hotel lobby was a mess of glass and bricks. Exotic fish lay dead on the bottom of a huge aquarium whose glass front had been blasted away.

Rescuers had been at work for 24 hours. One, Abdul Shakoor, said he started picking up the dead and injured from the road outside on Saturday, and by yesterday he was removing bodies found inside the hotel rooms.

"Three of those that I put in ambulances [on Saturday night] were still alive, they all lost parts of their legs from different places," said Shakoor.

CCTV footage released yesterday showed pandemonium at the hotel gates after a dumper truck rammed into the retractable metal barrier there. It also showed several vital minutes that could have been used to evacuate the hotel were wasted as security guards advanced and retreated from the vehicle, confused. There was a small blast inside the truck and it caught fire as the bomber within apparently detonated his suicide vest. A security guard could be seen spraying a fire extinguisher pointlessly against a growing fire ball. Finally, the fire caused the explosive payload to go off, but the video footage stops just before the blast.

Had the truck made it past the gates, the carnage would have been multiplied many times over.

Denying a major lapse of security, Rehman Malik, the interior ministry chief, rejected foreign offers of help with the investigation.

"We do get information about threats, all the time, but they are sketchy," he said. "Our agencies are fully competent and they will prove that."

Malik said that past terrorists acts had come from Pakistan's lawless border area with Afghanistan, known as the Federally Administered Tribal Area (Fata), and that would be

the focus of the investigation.

"In previous attacks, all roads led to Fata," he said. "We have two options: either we fight against the Taliban or we hand the country over to them."

Sadruddin Hashwani, the millionaire holder of the Marriott franchise in Pakistan, vowed to rebuild the hotel in four months, a target that seemed ambitious. He also complained that the police and security should have pounced on the truck before it got to the hotel.

"The footprints seem to be Taliban and al-Qaida," said Talat Masood, a retired general turned security analyst. "The militants are saying that we are so powerful we can attack anywhere at any time, and we will continue to do so unless you halt your military operations."

The Pakistan army is fighting home-grown extremists in the tribal areas and Swat, a valley in the north-west.



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