

Pakistan arrests suspected mastermind of Mumbai attacks

Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, named by sole surviving attacker as ringleader, held after raid on militant camp in Pakistani Kashmir

Saeed Shah in Islamabad

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Pakistan today captured a suspected mastermind of the Mumbai terrorist attacks in a raid on a camp run by Lashkar-e-Taiba, the jihadist group accused by Delhi of carrying out the assault on India's commercial capital.

Pakistani authorities moved after indications India was considering air strikes against Lashkar-e-Taiba camps inside Pakistan if there was no action by Islamabad.

Twelve members of the group were arrested last night by the army in the town of Muzaffarabad, according to reports, including Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, named by India as one of the planners of the Mumbai attacks, which left 171 people dead. A helicopter gunship hovered overhead during the raid, and gunfire was heard.

Muzaffarabad is the regional capital of the part of Kashmir held by Pakistan and is the nerve-centre of jihadist activity aimed across the "line of control" to the part of Kashmir ruled by India.

The raid was the first concrete sign of a crackdown against militants in Pakistan following the attack on Mumbai. Indian officials privately described it as "an important first step", though there was some scepticism in India about the nature of the raid.

The camp includes a hospital, a madrassa (Islamic school) and offices; it was unclear whether it was a training facility for militants. As it was on the outskirts of Muzaffarabad, it may only have been an administrative and charitable site. The complex was ostensibly being used by Jamaat ud Dawa, an Islamic organisation believed to be a front for the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba, but which claims to have no Islamist links.

The camp was subsequently sealed and the area cordoned. The Pakistan army acknowledged the raid but provided few details.

"This is an intelligence-led operation against banned militant outfits," said Major General Athar Abbas, the chief spokesman for the army. "There have been arrests and investigations are on. We are not disclosing any names. Further details will be available after preliminary investigations."

There was no move against the alleged headquarters of Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is

located just outside the eastern city of Lahore at Muridke. The group has denied involvement in the Mumbai attack.

Lakhvi is alleged to be the operations chief of the militant group and, according to some reports, recruited Ajmal Ameer Kasab, the lone gunman caught alive during the Mumbai assault.

It is unclear what happened to Lakhvi after his arrest. Also, the whereabouts of Yusuf Muzammil, the head of India activities who has been named by Indian officials as the other main planner of the Mumbai attack, is unknown. Reports suggested Indian authorities had asked for both men to be handed over.

Some locals in Muzaffarabad suggested some aspects of the raid may have been staged, and there are rumours the militants were tipped off. In the past, Pakistan has arrested the founder of Lashkar-e-Taiba, Hafiz Saeed, but then quietly let him go.

Analysts see little chance that Lakhvi or any other major Lashkar-e-Taiba commander will actually be given up to India. Pakistan's president, Asif Zardari, has said that anyone detained in Pakistan will be tried there.

Pakistan is under intense international pressure to act against Lashkar-e-Taiba but any concerted attempt to quash the group in Pakistan would be likely to be met with a violent response by its followers and a political backlash, placing Islamabad in a no-win position.

Today, the Pakistani government again complained that India had not shared evidence it claims to have on the participation of groups or individuals based in Pakistan. Islamabad also proposed that it would send a "high level delegation" to New Delhi.

"The main site of LeT is Muridke, Lahore, but they haven't done that," said Vikram Sood, an analyst in New Delhi and former head of India's RAW intelligence agency. "I wouldn't say this is a major move but I think it's to pre-empt any [Indian] action."

Within Pakistan, the religious right was predictably scathing over the Muzaffarabad raid.

"We've known for a long time that it [the camp] was there. If we wanted to take action, we should have done so, but not under external pressure we now face," said Fazlur Rehman, the head of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, a hardline religious party that is part of the ruling coalition in Islamabad.

Qazi Hussain Ahmad, the head of the other main religious party, Jamaat-e-Islami, said: "This [raid] is wrong. It's all a conspiracy by India and the US. This action shows up the weakness of this [Pakistani] government."

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