

Peaceful school or 'terror' base?

By Syed Shoaib Hasan
BBC News, Muridke, Pakistan

"As you can see for yourselves, this is not a training facility for terrorists," says Abdullah Muntazir.

Mr Muntazir is a spokesman for the Jamaat-ud-Dawa organisation, an Islamic charity.

The organisation has been labelled a political front for the militant organization, Lashkar-e-Taiba (Army of the Pure).

The Lashkar has been fighting the Indian armed forces in the disputed territory of Kashmir since 1990 and has been accused of hitting numerous Indian targets outside Kashmir - including last week's attacks in Mumbai in which 188 people died.

It has strongly denied being responsible for the Mumbai violence and most other incidents outside of Indian-administered Kashmir for which it has been accused.

Military strikes

But the Lashkar is nevertheless on the list of banned terrorist groups compiled by the US state department.

Mr Muntazir was speaking to the media at the Markaz-e-Taiba (Centre of the Pure) compound set up by Jamaat-ud-Dawa in Pakistan's Punjab province.

" We have nothing to hide here "
Abdullah Muntazir

The compound is commonly referred to as the main headquarters of the Jamaat-ud-Dawa.

It has also been described by Indian - and sometimes Pakistani - media as a training facility for Lashkar militants.

This perception has hardened since the attacks in Mumbai, with some Indian commentators talking about launching military strikes on the compound.

Although the BBC saw no militant activity in the camp, Lashkar is known to operate militant camps in areas of Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

To try to dispel perceptions, Jamaat-ud-Dawa hosted an open house for local and foreign journalists, including the BBC, on Thursday.

The centre is located outside the town of Muridke, about 40km (25 miles) from the eastern city of Lahore in central Punjab.

A small dusty lane leads off the main Grand Trunk Road through a small settlement of farmers and labourers to the gates of the compound.

Basic curriculum

Inside its 75-acre grounds are educational and residential facilities.

There is a secondary school for girls, a high school for boys and two madrassas, or religious schools, one each for girls and boys and hostels for the students.

We were taken on a tour of the entire complex by Mr Muntazir and his team.

"We have classes here until Intermediate (Pakistan equivalent of high school/'A' Levels)," says Rashid Minhas, principal of science.

"The subjects include English and the sciences. We have fully furnished labs here as well as facilities that you would find in any good school in Pakistan.

"The basic curriculum is the same as that taught all over Pakistan, with an added focus on Islam."

According to Mr Minhas, there are 530 boys and 345 girls in the school.

School is in session as we pass through the classrooms.

In the physics lab, a group of students are putting together a circuit which transfers electricity to a light bulb.

As the bulb flashes red, the students exchange smiles of accomplishment. The same scene could be replicated across countless other schools in Pakistan.

School setting

One student, Zohaib Naveed, says he is in class eight and comes from a nearby town.

He hopes to be an engineer when he grows up.

When asked by one of the journalists who his leader is, he says simply "Quaid-e-Azam". He is referring to Mohammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan.

In an adjoining class, students are conducting an experiment, using hydrochloric acid to produce a gas.

They smile and shyly pose for the camera, just like any other normal children in a school setting.

The difference is, because of the allegations levelled against Jamaat-ud-Dawa, their activities could well be deemed as "militant training".

But if that really is the case, the atmosphere in the school and the entire complex is remarkably open and easy.

Nearby is a newly-constructed 60-bed hospital which treats dozens of people daily.

The centre of the compound is dominated by a huge mosque, surrounded by the educational facilities, the residential complex and a small shopping centre

Men and women move about freely and there is no evidence of any militants or training facilities.

At the barrier at the main gate of the complex the guards were carrying no arms.

The entire complex, in fact, closely represents a university campus.

It appears to be nowhere near the armed training camp described in many - possibly speculative - stories in the international media.

"We have nothing to hide here," says Abdullah Muntazir.

"You can see with your own eyes that the focus is on education and welfare activities. We have nothing to do with Lashkar-e-Taiba.

"We have always followed the laws and regulations of Pakistan, and we believe the government will protect us in the face of these false accusations."

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