

# The path to terror in Canada



**National Post**

Three months after the RCMP began arresting 18 suspects accused of plotting terror attacks in Canada, an investigation by the National Post has uncovered a web of links to Pakistan. Today, in the first of four parts, the role of a Pakistani training camp is revealed.

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BALAKOT, Pakistan - A worn footpath climbs from the Kaghan Valley highway into the lush mountains above the River Kunar, on Kashmir's western frontier.

The locals all know where it leads.

An hour's walk up the steep trail there is a training camp built by Islamic militants called Madrassa Syed Ahmed Shaheed -- a long barracks building and a few guard posts to keep outsiders away.

Young Muslim volunteers from Pakistan and beyond have long trekked here to Balakot to train for jihad, and one of them was allegedly a Canadian named Jahmaal James.

A National Post reporter was able to locate the Balakot training camp and hike to its periphery, where an outbuilding could be seen, possibly a guard post.

Locals cautioned against visiting the "mujahedeen" camp, saying it was guarded by armed men who detained intruders as spies.

"Those people are mental," one man said.

An accused member of the Toronto extremist group that the RCMP says plotted al-Qaeda-inspired terror attacks in southern Ontario, Mr. James allegedly visited Balakot for training during a recent four-month trip to Pakistan.

What the 23-year-old did during his stay in the land of jihad is the subject of an ongoing counterterrorism probe involving police and intelligence services in several countries.

The charges against Mr. James remain unproven in court, and his family denies the allegation that he went to Pakistan for training.

"According to my information, it is false," said his uncle, Mohammed Al-Attique. "If [the] Crown has evidence, he should prove it in the court."

Authorities believe Mr. James is part of a web of links that tie Pakistan to the alleged plan by Muslim extremists to storm Parliament Hill and set off truck bombs in downtown Toronto.

At least four suspects associated with the Toronto group are believed to have attended, or attempted to attend, training camps in Pakistan. Another was a member of a hardline Pakistani religious sect that advocates global Islamic rule, and several others are of Pakistani origin.

While the Toronto plot has been widely described as the work of "homegrown" Canadian terrorists, the Pakistan connection has investigators probing the extent to which the group was influenced by the South Asian nation's rampant radicalism.

Indeed, counterterrorism authorities in several Western countries have been finding links between domestic terror plots and Pakistan, particularly to an emerging player in the global jihad called Lashkar-e-Tayyiba.

Unemployed and a follower of Imam Ali Hindy's firebrand preachings at the Salaheddin Islamic Centre in Scarborough, Mr. James left Toronto on Nov. 5, 2005.

After stopovers in London and Abu Dhabi, he landed in Pakistan. Within days he had consecrated an arranged marriage to the niece of Mr. Attique, a Toronto Islamic bookstore owner, but he also allegedly met up with a British-Pakistani known as Abu Umar.

Abu Umar was a regular contributor to a notorious jihadist Internet forum called Al-Tibbyan. Through the forum, he had befriended

some of the suspects in the Toronto terror case and even visited Toronto last year.

To jihadis, Abu Umar was considered a "go-to guy" who could help Western recruits gain access to Lashkar-e-Tayyiba's network of paramilitary training camps in Pakistan. The destruction of al-Qaeda's training bases in Afghanistan since 9/11 had made Pakistan's assorted militant groups the best hope for Western Muslims yearning for training.

Among those Abu Umar is alleged to have assisted was an Atlanta university student named Syed Haris Ahmed, an acquaintance of Mr. James. Mr. Ahmed travelled to Pakistan last summer to train with Lashkar, according to the FBI. He was arrested upon his return to Atlanta.

Abu Umar is also believed to have assisted Mr. James. But the young Canadian fell ill and had trouble making the connections he needed to fully enter the training camp world. Ultimately, however, authorities told the Post in Pakistan that he attended a camp in Balakot.

As a site for a terrorist training centre, Balakot is ideal. Surrounded by high mountains, it is cut off from the outside world by a sometimes impassable road. People here are also largely sympathetic to the Muslim "freedom fighters" who cross the nearby border into Indian-controlled Kashmir to stage guerrilla and terror attacks.

Getting to Balakot is a challenge in itself. From the capital, Islamabad, travellers take the chaotic Grand Trunk Road, then head north on the Korakoram Highway, the main route into the Himalayas.

Buses, motorcycles and elaborately painted trucks filled with bricks, pop bottles and burros play chicken with oncoming traffic, competing for the road's single lane with three-wheeled taxis, donkey carts and tractors.

At Mansehra, the road climbs east through a pass clogged with rock slides before descending into the Kaghan Valley and following the chocolate-coloured River Kunar upstream.

The Lonely Planet travel guide is not kind to Balakot, describing it as a town that "looks much better from a distance than up close." The earthquake of 2005 has only made things worse.

The quake trapped hundreds of Balakot children beneath the rubble of their school, which was crushed by boulders that came tumbling off the mountain slopes. Homes were flattened, bridges fell, and rocks the size of cars blocked the road. More than 4,000 were killed in Balakot alone, nearly a tenth of the population. Angelina Jolie even visited the town last November during a sympathy tour of Kashmir with Brad Pitt.

Almost a year later, the town has been partly rebuilt, with a new hospital and two new bridges, but it remains strewn with boulders and condemned houses. The summer monsoon has only added to the misery, washing away dozens of shelters that had been built to house survivors of the quake.

The bazaar at the centre of town is a collection of dirty roadside stalls that sell everything from grapes and bananas to sandals and shawls. Posters tacked to shop doors display the faces of those missing since the earthquake.

Locals said the training camp just south of town was a base for the mujahedeen "holy warriors" fighting what they consider India's occupation of disputed Kashmir.

"In fact, it was a camp," said Khalid Hawan, a Balakot resident who works for the French humanitarian group ACTED and claims to have seen the camp.

He took a reporter to a spot where he said one of the camp buildings could be seen high on a ridge. "The free fighters were there and they received training," he said.

Mr. Hawan said the Pakistani government closed the camp four or five months ago, although some locals believe it still operates and cautioned against getting too close.

A reporter was unable to find anyone in Balakot who recalled Mr. James, but many locals were aware of the camp, which they said had been built by the outlawed militant group Jaishe Mohamed.

It consists of several large buildings made from lumber pilfered from the surrounding pine forests. The militants occupy an area about three kilometres by one kilometre and have sentries posted to keep outsiders away, locals said.

"From there to there," said a government forestry worker, pointing to two pine-covered mountain peaks. "That is totally their area."

Asked if it was possible to visit the camp, two locals held up their hands and gestured as if they were shooting a rifle. "If you want to

see another place, go. But don't go there," one man said.

An employee of the Kaghan Forest Division was recently in the mountains inspecting trees when he wandered into an armed sentry, a co-worker said.

He was taken to the camp and accused of being a spy until villagers intervened and he was freed with a promise to never return, he said.

Balakot residents described seeing inhabitants of the training camp walking along the side of the highway, their long, full beards making them stand out as fundamentalist Muslims. Some were Kashmiris and Pakistanis, while others were foreigners, locals said.

The camp can also be reached by 4X4 jeep, on a narrow road that swings into the mountains behind an abandoned restaurant with a rusted children's roundabout out front.

"That's the way to the mujahedeen camp," a young boy bathing naked in a monsoon-flooded stream told a reporter, unprompted. The mud flap of a Toyota truck lay in a nearby rut.

The description of the camp provided by locals is consistent with that made by the FBI during a recent terrorism case in Lodi, Calif. India also claims to have captured two men it says have confessed to training in Balakot. They were allegedly planning suicide bombings in Mumbai.

According to the book *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan* by Muhammad Amir Rana, the camp is controlled by Maulana Masood Azhar, the leader of Jaishe Mohammed.

Training camps are a sensitive matter in Pakistan. While the Pakistani government once openly supported militant groups fighting in Afghanistan and Kashmir, since 9/11 President Pervez Musharraf has been under pressure to restrain the jihadis.

Pakistan has since outlawed several militant groups, including Jaishe Mohammed, and Azhar's brother-in-law Rashid Rauf was arrested on Aug. 9 for his suspected involvement in the British plot to blow up U.S.-bound airliners over the Atlantic.

Jaishe Mohammed was also banned by the Canadian government, which accuses it of calling for "the destruction of America, India, and all infidels worldwide."

But Jaishe Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba remain active and are among the largest armed factions fighting to make Indian-controlled Kashmir part of Pakistan. Meanwhile, there are indications that Lashkar has been transforming itself from a regional group focused on Kashmir into a global terror network.

Over the past two years, Lashkar has begun to open its doors to foreign Muslims, taking on the role that had previously been played by Osama bin Laden's camps in Afghanistan. Arrests in Australia, Britain, the United States and Canada have all been linked back to Lashkar.

The Lashkar training regimen consists of a three-week course called Daura Aam, and an advanced guerrilla warfare and commando course called Daura Khas, according to Syed Adnan Ali Shah, a research fellow at the Institute for Strategic Studies in Islamabad.

Recruits begin by discarding their name and adopting a kuniyat, or Arabic nickname. Shaving and haircuts are forbidden. Lashkar members distinguish themselves by wearing their shalwar khamiz outfits above the ankles.

Despite the ban on its activities, Lashkar continues to operate a training camp in Pakistan, he said, adding it was possible the group was training in Balakot.

"It might be a very small compound, it might be a very small home, it might be to see videos and discuss with each other," he said. "It might be the home of an activist who had gone underground."

Since the earthquake hit Balakot, aid groups have set up compounds near the riverbanks to care for residents while their homes are repaired. The most visible by far is Jamaat ud Dawa.

Widely considered a front for Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Jamaat is a preaching network of radical mosques and madrassas. It was founded by Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, who also founded Lashkar-e-Tayyiba. Many believe they are one and the same. At the very least, they share a common ideology.

Behind a corrugated metal fence decorated with black-and-white flags bearing the Jamaat logo -- a curved sword and Urdu script -- the group operates a health clinic, pharmacy, school, mosque and warehouse.

"When the earthquake happened, they are the people that were here first," said an elderly man at the Jamaat compound who called himself Jamil but declined to give his full name because he said he feared repercussions from the Pakistani authorities.

"They've been digging out the dead bodies and they have been taking the injured to the hospital before all the NGOs [non-governmental organizations]."

He denied Jamaat was involved in terrorism. "The West says they are terrorists. They are not terrorists. These are the most noble, the most humble, the most sincere people," he said.

Not everybody agrees. Jamaat is a banned terrorist organization in the United States, which calls it a front for Lashkar. Its founder, Mr. Saeed, is being detained by Pakistan for inciting unrest.

When the Pakistani government outlawed Lashkar, Mr. Saeed immediately launched Jamaat ud Dawa. But the United States and some experts on Pakistani militant groups contend that was simply a shell game.

Jamil calls that "Western propaganda."

"The people from Pakistan and especially the Muslim countries, they are funding this organization," he said. "They are giving money to these people and they are honestly distributing it to the people."

Despite its claim to be helping Balakot's earthquake victims, the Jamaat compound was eerily quiet during a recent visit. Aside from a few Jamaat volunteers reclining on carpets in the mosque, the compound was empty. Not a single patient was seeking help at the clinic.

Terrorist or not, Jamaat subscribes to a harsh anti-Western ideology that promotes the same Wahabist religious interpretation that al-Qaeda uses to justify its terrorist attacks.

Sitting on floor mats in a fly-infested room with an ancient computer humming in one corner, one of the Jamaat managers hands over a copy of the group's in-house magazine, "Voice of Islam."

Jamil said the publication is banned in the West. A glance at the headlines shows why. Its articles waver from wildly conspiratorial (one describes Valentine's Day as a Western plot to spread "debauchery, immorality and killings" in the Muslim world) to dangerous, citing Islamic scripture to justify killing non-Muslims.

"Let there be curse upon the Jews and the Christians," reads the magazine's "fatwah section." Elsewhere, it says not to befriend "disbelievers" until they convert to Islam. If they reject Islam, it says, "then take them and kill them."

Two pages of the magazine are devoted to the "activities of freedom fighters in occupied Kashmir." One item, headlined "29 Indian dispatched to hell," describes an attack on an income tax office in Srinigar, India.

The magazine includes an editorial by Mr. Saeed that condemns the Pakistani government for reforms he complains are turning the country into "a modern Western state."

"Egyptians have made their country modern," he writes. "Now there [sic] country is working as the base for the advancement of Jewish interests. Its streets give a Western look and these territories are under undeclared occupation of Christian world."

Pakistan welcomed Jamaat's help following the earthquake, but there are concerns the group may be exploiting the grief in villages such as Balakot to spread its Saudi brand of extremist ideology.

"This is wrong. Jamaat ud Dawa is a peaceful party, or you could say foundation," said Abdul Hatif, a Balakot teacher who survived the earthquake but lost 16 of his students.

The scene in Balakot is reminiscent of Bosnia in the early 1990s -- several Islamic aid organizations, some of them linked to terrorism, which may be doing humanitarian work but which could also provide cover for terrorists.

Mr. James did not stay long in Balakot. Sickly and unhappy, he left his bride and returned to Canada in March, 2006, allegedly having failed to obtain anything more than a one-week small arms training course from Lashkar.

"He was in Lahore," countered Mr. Attique, who knows not only Mr. James but also another of the Toronto terror suspects, Steven Chand, who lived in Mr. Attique's basement. "He never went to [the] border or Kashmir or Afghanistan, never."

Just over two months after his return to Canada, Mr. James was arrested by the RCMP on June 2 and charged along with 17 others for his alleged role in a Toronto-based group led by Fahim Ahmad and Zacharia Amara that is accused of training for terror and

plotting attacks.

He is facing two charges under the Anti-terrorism Act: participating in a terror group and receiving terrorist training. He is scheduled to appear in court in Brampton this month for a bail hearing.

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TUESDAY

The Suspect's Wife

In part two, the Post travels to Lahore for an exclusive interview with the bride of an alleged Toronto terrorist.

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