

Security crisis in Punjab

Pak - National
Security

By Riaz Missen

TERRORISTS equipped with Kalashnikovs and rocket launchers struck in Lahore on Tuesday. Sri Lankan cricket team was their target but the incident left a demoralising effect on the people in general; it occurred amidst reports about clashes between the supporters of the rival parties vying for control over Punjab.

Only a few days back the PML-N had lost its government in Punjab after the apex court disqualified its leadership from electoral politics which it considers a politically motivated decision. Soon, it became apparent when President Zardari, who is also the leader of the PPP, opted to impose governor's rule in Punjab rather than let the legislature elect a new leader. These ill-conceived measures, however, did not stop the outraged PML-N workers from venting out their anger on the roads and streets across the province.

While the leadership of the largest opposition party, annoyed over abrupt end of its rule in the largest province of the country, announced to organise protests in other provinces as well, there were apprehensions that such protests could lead to ethnic clashes in Sindh and Balochistan. The growing tension between the PPP and PML-N had painted a grim picture on the political front when the terrorist attack took place. The Lankan players, travelling in a bus, were saved but it took lives of the six poorly equipped but highly patriotic policemen.

Restlessness in southern India, where Tamils make a majority, over the crushing defeat of the LTTE by the Sri Lankan army, probably prompted some hard-headed outfits in the neighbouring country to take revenge on finding Lahore a soft target. This is one of the possibilities though no indication has yet come to prove this. The foreign minister of Sri Lanka has also raised this possibility in his reaction.

The terrorists' success in their mission and subsequent safe disappearance without a casualty is a great setback for Pakistan and in fact a huge failure of the security apparatus as admitted by the commissioner of Lahore.

"Certain security lapses are very vivid and very clear," he said.

And all this mess at a time when no cricket team is willing to land in Pakistan because they see grave security threat to their lives and Sri Lankan team, in a gesture of support to the isolated Pakistanis, had opted to play in Pakistan by ignoring security threats and by relying on their hosts' arrangements for their security.

It is interesting to note that when the visitors had asked for tight security arrangements in Lahore the cricket board officials had assured them that they would be provided presidential level security which, of course, was not there. Actually, things went awry after Punjab administration's entire attention was shifted to containing PML-N's agitation and winning the number game for the PPP in the Assembly. The possibility of a terror attack on Sri Lankans was deemed very remote and hence their travel on the roads was treated in a casual manner. Even Elite Force members covering the guests were not adequately equipped.

The commando-style attack reminds one of the similar incident in Mumbai which had brought Indo-Pakistan relations to their lowest ebb. However, India did not lose this opportunity to remind Islamabad that it has yet to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure on its soil and that such incidents would continue to take place till that was done.

The spokesperson of the Punjab government has meanwhile ruled out the involvement of any neighbouring country in the shootout. The traditionally-minded analysts were as quick as ever to point their accusing fingers at the RAW.

"It is unfortunate that the government had diverted all its attention in saving the skins of the illegal judges who disqualified the popularly elected government of ours," said Shahbaz Sharif while commenting on the terror attack on the Sri Lankan team. He blamed Asif Ali Zardari for the whole mayhem and reiterated his resolve to offer any sacrifice to make his (Zardari's) designs fail.

Meanwhile, battle lines appear to be

drawn in Punjab in the aftermath of Supreme Court's controversial judgment. The governor's rule was considered the only option by Islamabad to seek installation of a PPP regime in Punjab as well as to prevent Nawaz Sharif from letting his party workers to actively take part in the lawyers' long march on Islamabad.

While PML-N workers held protest rallies and burnt tyres across the province and some other cities, one development of interest is that its leadership has now adopted an aggressive attitude towards Asif Ali Zardari, openly revealing how he had been cheating the PML-N in the past by making false promises and how he tried to have a bargain with it on the disqualification issue. "It is not a verdict but an edict," Nawaz Sharif said pointing his accusing finger at Asif Ali Zardari who, he insists, is the real hurdle in the way of the restoration of Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. He is convinced that Zardari is following in Pervez Musharraf's footsteps by retaining his paradigm and practising his policies.

The PPP has, meanwhile, decided to give a matching response to PML-N's tirade against Zardari; it has mobilised its cadres as evident from reports of clashes between the two parties in a few cities.

The situation now is that the lawyers have full support of the PML-N in its long march which is to reach Islamabad on March 16. Other parties which would join the march include Jamaat-i-Islami, Jamiat Ahl-i-Hadith and Imran Khan's Tehrik-e-Insaf.

While Sharifs have taken their war against Mr Asif Ali Zardari too far, they have their own weaknesses: Chaudhry Nisar, the opposition leader in the National Assembly and chairman Public Accounts Committee is not feeling the heat of the raging conflict — he appears to be concerned only with Rahman Malik, the premier's advisor.

He is more receptive to the calls of reconciliation with the ruling camp than the other leaders of the PML-N. Only if the circumstances help him, he can safely hope to replace Nawaz Sharif as the leader of the second largest party of the country. ■