Gunmen Storm University in Pakistan, Killing at Least 20 People

January 20, 2016

By [Tim Craig](http://www.washingtonpost.com/people/tim-craig)

The Washington Post

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/gunmen-storm-college-campus-in-northwestern-pakistan/2016/01/20/7497fec0-bf38-11e5-bcda-62a36b394160_story.html>

Gunmen slipped into a college campus under cover of fog Wednesday, killing at least 20 people — shooting some execution style — in the latest terrorist attack in Pakistan targeting students in apparent revenge for expanding [military crackdowns](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/amid-fighting-in-tribal-areas-pakistan-braces-for-a-long-and-deadly-war/2015/02/19/d200b070-b13d-11e4-bf39-5560f3918d4b_story.html).

The attack , claimed by a Taliban faction, is likely to unite the country behind stern action against Islamist militants 13 months after a [similar rampage](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/taliban-storm-a-public-school-in-pakistan/2014/12/16/bcd6f928-84f8-11e4-b9b7-b8632ae73d25_story.html) at a nearby army-run school killed about 150 students and teachers.

Four suspected attackers also were killed in Wednesday’s bloodshed, officials said.

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif vowed a “ruthless response,” saying the attack was on all of Pakistan.

“Cowards and their finances will see our national resolve to eliminate terror,” a statement issued by his office said, even as some Pakistani media outlets reported that the death toll could rise from among the dozens wounded.

The assault began about 9 a.m. when at least four gunmen cut through a back fence into Bacha Khan University in Charsadda, about 30 miles from Peshawar.

“I saw two terrorists standing on the roof. . . . They were shouting Allahu Akhbar,” said Basit Khan, a student of computer sciences, referring to an Islamic cry for God is great. “After that, firing started and I and my friends started running. There were people screaming. We were terrified.”

Eyewitnesses told The Washington Post that many of the university students were shot in the head.

Ashfaq Ahmad, a security officer of the university, told the Post that the attackers snuck in through the backyard of the university and “were restricted to the boy’s hostel when security guards opened fire on them.” He said most of the victims were male students. He said a cook and an assistant professor were also among the dead.

“The attackers cut the barbed wire and jumped into the campus. Our guards engaged them and they did not reach the girl’s hostel and main administration block,” he said. He described four attackers around 20 years of age.

Shaukat Yousafzai, a local lawmaker, said preliminary information indicated at least 20 people had been killed. Yousafzai said at least 50 people had been injured, many of whom were suffering from gunshot wounds.

A Pakistani Taliban regional group — Omar Mansoor from Darra Adam Khel region — claimed responsibility for the attack. “We have sent four suicide attackers and they have killed dozens of people,” said a statement by the group, which is also believed to have been behind the Peshawar school attack.

“This is a message to the Pakistani army and civilian leadership, who have executed 130 mujahideen, our people. We will carry out more attacks to take revenge on them,” the group said.

Maj. Gen. Asim Bajwa, a spokesman for the Pakistan military, said security forces converged on the campus and killed four suspected terrorists. Bajwa said a search operation was still ongoing.

The co-ed university is named after Bacha Khan, a Pashtun nationalist leader who was the founder of Pakistan’s Awami National Party.

The party is known for its strong anti-Taliban views, and many of its leaders have been killed in recent years. Wednesday was the 28th year anniversary of Khan’s death. The attack occurred as a gathering of Pashtun poets was taking place on campus to commemorate the anniversary

Saeed Khan Wazir, a senior police officer, told media that the gunmen snuck onto school grounds by using the cover of Pakistan’s chronically foggy mornings during the winter.

“There was severe fog, and visibility was almost none,” Wazir said.

One student told Pakistan’s Channel 24 news that he was in his dormitory when he heard gunshots.

 “It was a deafening sound, and first we decided to go out and run, but upon hearing continuous firing, we shut our room doors,” the student said. “Two terrorists came to my door and shouted, ‘We are army, and we are here to rescue you.’ But I didn’t open the door.

“After this, they started firing at the door, but I lied down on the floor silently waiting till they were gone.”

Prime Minister Sharif, who is in Zurich for a global economic conference, said in an earlier statement that law enforcement agencies converged on the scene to rescue students and faculty members.

“We are determined and resolved in our commitment to wipe out the menace of terrorism from our homeland,” he said. “The countless sacrifices made by our countrymen will not go in vain.”

In December 2014, a terrorist attack at an army-run school in Peshawar killed about 150 teachers and students. After that, Pakistani officials greatly enhanced security at educational establishments, including erecting walls lined with razor wire and mandating the presence of armed guards at some institutions. Some provinces in Pakistan even authorized teachers to carry firearms in the classroom.

But there have been repeated warnings that schools remained vulnerable to attack. On Tuesday, parents throughout northwestern Pakistan rushed to pull their children out of school after rumors spread through communities that a terrorist attack on a school may be imminent.

The Taliban also shot schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai in the head in 2012 while she sat on her school bus in Pakistan’s Swat Valley, also in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Yousafzai survived, wrote a book about her ordeal, and was awarded the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize.

The Pakistani Taliban is an off-shoot of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

In Pakistan, the group is pushing for the imposition of Sharia law. Since its founding in the mid-2000s, more than 50,000 Pakistanis have been killed in terrorist attacks or battles between the military and Islamist militants.

In June 2014, after an attack on Karachi’s international airport killed more than two-dozen people, the Pakistani military launched a major operation to drive Islamist militants from their safe-havens in northwestern Pakistan’s tribal belt. The operation intensified a year ago after the Peshawar school attack.

Throughout 2015, there had been a marked decline in violence in Pakistan. According to a recent report by the Pak Institute of Peace Studies, 2015 was Pakistan’s safest year since 2007 because terrorist attacks dropped by 48 percent compared to the previous year.

“The spaces for extremist’s apologists in public discussions and mainstream media are gradually shrinking, which contributed in keeping the discourse on counterterrorism focused,” the report concluded.

Security and analysts, however, have repeatedly stressed that the Pakistani Taliban was still capable of pulling off headline-grabbing attacks, especially in the northwestern part of the country. In September, the Pakistani Taliban took credit for an attack on a Pakistani Air Force base in Peshawar, killing 29 people.

The Pakistani Taliban, whose leadership is believed to reside in Afghanistan, also claimed credit for setting a roadside bomb that killed six people near a military checkpoint in Khyber Agency on Tuesday. A day earlier, five Pakistani soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb in the western city of Quetta.