

By Scott Stewart

The Islamabad office of the United Nations' World Food Program (WFP) was struck by a suicide bomber just after noon local time Oct. 5. The bomber, who wore an improvised explosive device (IED) concealed under his clothing, was wearing the uniform of the Frontier Constabulary, a paramilitary force, and reportedly made his way past perimeter security and into the facility under the ruse of asking to use the restroom. Once inside the facility, he detonated his explosive device, killing five WFP employees — one Iraqi national and four locals — and injuring six others.

The attack, claimed by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), would be the first successful TTP attack in Islamabad since June 6, and the first attack against Western interests in a Pakistani city since the June 9 attack against the Pearl Continental hotel in Peshawar using a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED).

In his Oct. 6 call to The Associated Press and other media outlets to claim responsibility for the attack, TTP spokesman Azam Tariq said the group is planning additional attacks against similar targets. "The WFP is promoting the U.S. agenda," Tariq said, and "such types of suicide attacks will continue in the future. We will target all people and offices working for American interests. We have sent more suicide bombers in various parts of the country and they have been given targets."

The WFP office in Islamabad is located in an upscale part of town but outside of the diplomatic enclave. While the roads leading into the area are blocked by police checkpoints, the sector is not nearly as heavily locked down as the diplomatic enclave, which made it easier for an attacker to approach the WFP office. The office does have an exterior security wall, but that wall provides very little standoff — in other words, there is not much distance between the building and the road. From an attacker's perspective, the WFP is a far softer target than a facility such as the U.S. Embassy, which has a significant standoff.

The only thing that provides protection from a large explosive device is distance, and due to the small amount of standoff at the WFP office, if that office had been attacked using a large VBIED like the one used in the September 2008 attack against the Marriott hotel in Islamabad, the attack would have been devastating. However, the attack against the WFP office was not conducted with a massive device but with a small one. It appears that the pressure the Pakistani government has placed upon the TTP (with U.S. assistance) has reduced the group's ability to conduct high-profile attacks. Indeed, following the attack on the Pearl Continental hotel, there had been a noticeable lull in the TTP's operations — even before the Aug. 5 death of TTP leader Baitullah Mehsud in a U.S. missile strike. The WFP bombing serves as a message that while the TTP is down, it is not yet out and more low-level attacks can be expected in the near term.

## Going Small

Small-scale attacks like the one the TTP launched against the WFP office are relatively easy to conduct and require very few resources. This makes them far easier to sustain than large-scale VBIED attacks. The approximately 2,000 pounds of explosives used in the massive VBIED deployed against the Islamabad Marriott could be used to create scores of suicide IEDs like the one used against the WFP. There has been a trend in the last few years in which militant groups have shifted away from larger devices in favor of smaller ones.

This trend is especially noticeable when the group is under intense pressure, like Tanzim Qaedat al-Jihad in Indonesia (and the TTP at the present time). Small-scale attacks require fewer resources, and smaller devices can be built and transported more clandestinely than huge VBIEDs. They can also be manufactured more quickly, which allows for a higher tempo of operations. However, these smaller devices must be used in a different type of attack and are often taken into the targeted site using a ruse, like a Frontier Constabulary uniform in Islamabad; posing as hotel guests and workers in Jakarta; or even hidden inside the bomber's body, as we saw in Saudi Arabia on Aug. 28.

In the wake of the WFP attack and the TTP's warning that more attacks are coming, security measures at the offices of humanitarian aid, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are certain to be inspected and tightened up (at least until complacency sets in) to protect against this type of ruse attack using a small suicide device.

One of the other advantages of using these small devices is that they provide attackers a great deal of flexibility in employing them — a flexibility that is often used to bypass security measures. However, identifying gaps in security requires surveillance — often extended surveillance — and during that surveillance attackers are susceptible to being identified.

Historically, aid organizations simply do not have the security budget to afford the types of physical security equipment and guard coverage afforded to embassies or even commercial establishments like large hotels, and this makes them relatively soft targets. But even if these offices are hardened by increased security and by proactive measures such as employing countersurveillance teams and the offices thus become more difficult to strike using small devices, the employees of these organizations will remain vulnerable as they do their work in the field.

## Aid Workers as Targets

By its very nature, the work conducted by an aid group is very different from that conducted by a diplomatic mission. While diplomats like to travel to different parts of the country they are assigned to and meet with a variety of people, their primary mission is to be the representatives of their home government to the foreign government where they are assigned and accredited. This means that, while they may balk at strict security measures, they can still perform many of their functions in dangerous locations like Islamabad or Baghdad, even though their movement outside of the embassy is tightly restricted and requires considerable security. The same is simply not true for organizations like the WFP, the United Nations Development Program

(UNDP), Doctors Without Borders or the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), among others. These organizations exist to bring shelter, food and medicine to refugees and displaced people, and such people are often found in conflict zones such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia. This means that aid employees are very vulnerable to being targeted when they are outside of their offices.

Last October, STRATFOR discussed the growing trend of jihadists attacking aid workers and the tension the trend was creating among jihadist ideologues. Some ideologues, such as Isam Mohammed Taher al-Barqawi, more popularly known by the nom de guerre Abu-Muhammad Asem al-Maqdisi, have taken a clear stand against targeting "genuine" humanitarian organizations. In his writings, al-Maqdisi has specifically referred to the International Committee of the Red Cross, noting how it is a legitimate humanitarian organization with no hidden agenda and that its valuable services to the poor and dispossessed should be appreciated.

However, many jihadist leaders do not differentiate between the political aspect of the United Nations and the separate organizations that operate under the aegis of the United Nations for humanitarian purposes, such as the WFP, UNHCR, UNDP and UNICEF. In addition to the Oct. 6 message from the TTP spokesman who noted that the WFP is an infidel organization that promotes the U.S. agenda, other jihadist leaders have also spoken out against the United Nations. In an April 2008 speech, al Qaeda second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri said, "The United Nations is an enemy of Islam and Muslims: It is the one which codified and legitimized the setting up of the state of Israel and its taking over of the Muslims' lands."

Clearly, over the past year this ideological battle inside jihadist circles has been decided in favor of those who advocate attacks against humanitarian workers, since such attacks are increasing — and the problem is not just confined to Pakistan. A recent report by the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office noted that attacks against aid workers in Afghanistan are twice as frequent as they were last year — and 2008 had seen significantly more fatalities than 2007 — so things are clearly getting worse there, and the Afghan Taliban are launching more frequent ambushes and roadside IED attacks against clearly marked white aid vehicles. In Pakistan, at least three UNHCR employees have been assassinated so far this year, and a UNHCR employee and UNICEF employee were among those killed in the June bombing of the Pearl Continental Hotel in Peshawar. The Pearl was essentially the headquarters for many of the aid organizations in Peshawar. Outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan, aid workers also have been attacked in Iraq, Somalia, Yemen and Sudan, among other places.

For these aid workers, the perception by groups like the Afghan Taliban, the TTP and al Qaeda that they are a part of the U.S. agenda — and this translates into a war against Islam — means that they will be targeted for attacks.

The increase in attacks has often led to the drawdown of Western aid employees in a given country, and this has forced these organizations to rely heavily on local, mainly Muslim, employees to conduct most of the relief work in the most dangerous places. However, the track record over the past few years has demonstrated that local employees are every bit as likely to be targeted as their Western colleagues. This is in part due to the fact that jihadists declare that all Muslims who work with infidels are apostates and therefore no better than infidels

themselves. (This is called the doctrine of Takfir, or apostasy, and the fact that the jihadists claim to have the ability to declare another Muslim an apostate is very controversial within Islam, as is the killing of non-combatants such as humanitarian workers.)

In Pakistan, local aid workers are dedicated to reaching the hungry, sick and dispossessed people they serve, and this makes them extremely vulnerable to attack because they operate in some very remote and dangerous places. They are far more likely to be working outside of the larger, more secure organizational offices and in smaller, more vulnerable clinics and food distribution points. Because of this, there is a high likelihood that if the organizational offices present too hard a target, these lower-level aid workers and smaller aid distribution points could be targeted in lower-level TTP attacks. This would be part of the TTP effort to derail what it perceives as the U.S. agenda to stabilize (or, in the TTP's eyes, influence and control) Pakistan by providing aid to the people displaced by the fighting between the government of Pakistan and the TTP and its foreign allies.

Such attacks will hurt the TTP as far as public opinion goes, as have its attacks in Islamabad, Peshawar and elsewhere. But in light of the losses it has taken on the battlefield in places like Swat and in light of the coming offensive in South Waziristan, the TTP's priority is to prove that it is still a force to be reckoned with — and more important, negotiated with. So the attacks will continue, and we can anticipate that many of them will be against humanitarian workers.

Copyright STRATFOR [www.stratfor.com](http://www.stratfor.com) Reproduced with permission. All right reserved