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Pilot Saw Bullets From Cockpit in Deadly Pakistan Landing

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Tariq Chaudhry had little time to react when a storm of bullets headed straight toward him as he piloted a **Pakistan** International Airlines Corp. plane with about 200 people aboard toward the runway in Peshawar two days ago.

“I could see the volley of bullets coming and passing right and left of the plane’s cockpit,” Chaudhry, a pilot with 25 years of experience, said by phone yesterday, estimating that as many as 80 shots were fired at the Airbus SAS A310. “The hail of fire was so powerful that it was not possible to turn the plane left or right.”

Once he landed the plane, Chaudhry helped the three on board who were hit, including a Pakistani woman named Maqnoon Begum who later died. He counted 13 bullet holes in the plane, which was en route from **Saudi Arabia**, and found metal casings for 7.62-caliber bullets commonly used in AK-47 assault rifles.

Pakistan’s second airport attack in a month risks hampering Prime Minister **Nawaz Sharif’s** moves to boost economic growth to an eight-year high after securing an International Monetary Fund loan last year. Two weeks ago, Taliban fighters killed 26 people at Karachi’s international airport and warned foreign investors, airlines and multinational companies to cut business ties with Pakistan.

“Two events in such a short space of time will clearly raise question marks,” Chris de Lavigne, an aviation and defense analyst at **Frost & Sullivan**, said by phone from **Singapore**. “No doubt the insurance companies will review their policies with the airlines, and overall it will probably become a more expensive place to fly into.”

Lights Off

Chaudhry said he always turns off the plane’s main lights when landing in **Peshawar**, a city of 3.5 million people that has been a main battleground in an insurgency that has killed 50,000 people in Pakistan since 2001. The bullets came while the plane was 1,000 feet (300 meters) off the ground, he said.

“Only the lights in the cabin and navigation lights were on, which gave the attackers a fair idea where the plane was,” he said. “We would’ve been sitting ducks if all the main lights of the plane were on.”



Photographer: Mohammad Sajjad/AP Photo

The body of a passenger killed in a shooting is placed in an ambulance at Peshawar airport in Pakistan.

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State-run PIA condemned the shooting, which injured two flight attendants, and lauded Chaudhry for safely landing the aircraft. The company said in a statement that it will maintain its flight schedules and employees "will not be held back due to this type of deplorable incident."

Emirates airlines, Etihad Airways PJSC and Air Arabia PJSC suspended flights to Peshawar yesterday because of the security situation, according to statements from the airlines. FlyDubai flights to Pakistan will continue as normal, a spokeswoman said by phone.

Airlines Avoid

Hong Kong-based Cathay Pacific Airways Ltd. said earlier this month it would cease flights to Karachi on June 28 because of "commercial reasons." **Malaysian Airline System Bhd. (MAS)** stopped flying to Pakistan two years ago, while **Singapore Airlines Ltd. (SIA)** halted flights to the country in 2009. No European, U.S., Australian, Indian or Japanese carriers fly to Pakistan.

"If a trend emerges that the new focus is to go after airports, airlines and international airlines, then obviously companies will have to review the situation," said Huma Yusuf, senior Pakistan analyst at Control Risks in **London**. "It's too soon to tell whether these were targeted or opportunistic attacks," she said, adding that the Taliban have long focused on striking state security forces and government infrastructure.

Police detained 200 people after the bullets were fired from a "thickly populated area," Najeeb-ur-Rehman, the city's senior superintendent of police, said by phone. The attack took place at around 11 p.m. local time.

Taliban Threat

"There was a threat that they would attack the airport," Najeeb-ur-Rehman said, referring to militants in the area. Firing at a plane while it was in the air was the "easiest way" to strike because police had tightened security at the airport, he said.

No one has yet claimed responsibility for the attack. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, known as the TTP, said it conducted the Karachi airport assault, prompting Sharif to order an offensive on the group in North Waziristan, a region near the Afghan border. The TTP wants to impose its version of Islamic Shariah law in Pakistan, which includes a ban on music and stricter rules for women.

"With airports, the demographic of those who travel tend to be more well-heeled and better connected," said Terence Fan, an aviation expert at **Singapore Management University**. "This can have a bigger psychological impact rather than trains, which have more of the ordinary folk who I guess are not the target."

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Air Strikes

As many as 47 militants were killed two days ago in air strikes in North Waziristan and another tribal region of Khyber which also borders on **Afghanistan**, the military said in a statement. More than 330 Taliban insurgents have been killed in air strikes and shooting since the operation began. The military is yet to mount a ground offensive.

Sharif won an election last year after pledging peace talks with the TTP, the group at the forefront of an insurgency that has killed 50,000 people since 2001. Negotiations that began in March collapsed over the TTP's demands for prisoner releases.

Pakistan has incurred \$102.5 billion in costs due to incidents of terrorism in the past 13 years, according to a finance ministry report this month. Pakistan seeks to boost economic growth to an eight-year high of 5.1 percent in the coming fiscal year from an estimated 4.1 percent.

Chaudhry, the pilot who landed the stricken aircraft, said the incident won't prevent him from flying to Peshawar again.

"I will continue to fly planes," Chaudhry said. "There was also a threat to the airport, and all the airlines know of the threat level there. This is not a new thing."