

Elite US troops ready to combat Pakistani nuclear hijacks

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Christina Lamb in Washington

The US army is training a crack unit to seal off and snatch back Pakistani nuclear weapons in the event that militants, possibly from inside the country's security apparatus, get their hands on a nuclear device or materials that could make one.

The specialised unit would be charged with recovering the nuclear materials and securing them.

The move follows growing anti-Americanism in Pakistan's military, a series of attacks on sensitive installations over the past two years, several of which housed nuclear facilities, and rising tension that has seen a series of official complaints by US authorities to Islamabad in the past fortnight.

"What you have in Pakistan is nuclear weapons mixed with the highest density of extremists in the world, so we have a right to be concerned," said Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, a former CIA officer who used to run the US energy department's intelligence unit. "There have been attacks on army bases which stored nuclear weapons and there have been breaches and infiltrations by terrorists into military facilities."

Professor Shaun Gregory, director of the Pakistan security research unit at Bradford University, has tracked a number of attempted security breaches since 2007. "The terrorists are at the gates," he warned.

In a counterterrorism journal, published by America's West Point military academy, he documented three incidents. The first was an attack in November 2007 at Sargodha in Punjab, where nuclearcapable F-16 jet aircraft are thought to be stationed. The following month a suicide bomber struck at Pakistan's nuclear airbase at Kamra in Attock district. In August 2008 a group of suicide bombers blew up the gates to a weapons complex at the Wah cantonment in Punjab, believed to be one of Pakistan's nuclear warhead assembly plants. The attack left 63 people dead.

A further attack followed at Kamra last October. Pakistan denies that the base still has a nuclear role, but Gregory believes it does. A six-man suicide team was arrested in Sargodha last August.

Fears that militants could penetrate a nuclear facility intensified after a brazen attack on army headquarters in Rawalpindi in October when 10 gunmen wearing army uniforms got inside and laid siege for 22 hours. Last month there was an attack on the naval command centre in Islamabad.

Pakistani police said five Americans from Washington who were arrested in Pakistan last month after trying to join the Taliban were carrying a map of Chashma Barrage, a complex in Punjab that includes a nuclear power facility.

The Al-Qaeda leadership has made no secret of its desire to get its hands on weapons for a "nuclear 9/11".

"I have no doubt they are hell-bent on acquiring this," said Mowatt-Larssen. "These guys are thinking of nuclear at the highest level and are approaching it in increasingly professional ways."

Nuclear experts and US officials say the biggest fear is of an inside job amid growing anti-American feeling in Pakistan. Last year 3,021 Pakistanis were killed in terrorist attacks, more than in Afghanistan, yet polls suggest Pakistanis consider the United States to be a greater threat than the Taliban.

"You have 8,000-12,000 [people] in Pakistan with some type of role in nuclear missiles — whether as part of an assembly team or security," said Gregory. "It's a very large number and there is a real possibility that among those people are sympathisers of terrorist or jihadist groups who may facilitate some kind of attack."

Pakistan is thought to possess about 80 nuclear warheads. Although the weapons are well guarded, the fear is that materials or processes to enrich uranium could fall into the wrong hands.

"All it needs is someone in Pakistan within the nuclear establishment and in a position of key access to become radicalised," said

MowattLarsen. "This is not just theoretical. It did happen — Pakistan has had inside problems before."

Bashir Mahmood, the former head of Pakistan's plutonium reactor, formed the Islamic charity Ummah Tameer-e-Nau in March 2000 after resigning from the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission. He was arrested in Islamabad on October 23, 2001, with his associate Abdul Majeed for alleged links to Osama Bin Laden.

Pakistan's military leadership, which controls the nuclear programme, has always bristled at the suggestion that its nuclear facilities are at risk. The generals insist that storing components in different sites keeps them secure.

US officials refused to speak on the record about American safety plans, well aware of how this would be seen in Islamabad. However, one official admitted that the United States does not know where all of Pakistan's storage sites are located. "Don't assume the US knows everything," he said.

Although Washington has provided \$100m worth of technical assistance to Islamabad under its nuclear protection programme, US personnel have been denied access to most Pakistani nuclear sites.

In the past fortnight the US has made unprecedented formal protests to Pakistan's national security apparatus, warning it about fanning virulent anti-American sentiment in the media.

Concerns about hostility towards America within elements of the Pakistani armed forces first surfaced in 2007. At a meeting of military commanders staged at Kurram, on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, a Pakistani major drew his pistol and shot an American. The incident was hushed up as a gunfight.

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