

Pakistan gov't accused of cover-up

Al-Qaida denies involvement in slaying despite official accusations

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan – Islamic militants said Saturday they had no link to Benazir Bhutto's assassination, dismissing government claims that a leader of pro-Taliban forces in Pakistan carried out the suicide attack on the opposition leader.

Bhutto's aides also said they doubted the militant commander Baitullah Mehsud was behind the attack and accused the government of a cover-up.

The dispute and conflicting reports about Bhutto's exact cause of death was expected to further enflame the violence wracking this nuclear-armed nation two days after the popular former prime minister was killed in a suicide attack.

Three Bhutto supporters were shot dead Saturday, bringing the death toll to 42 since her assassination in a gun and bomb attack on Thursday.

Roads across Bhutto's southern Sindh province were littered with burning vehicles as mobs of supporters continued their rampage. Factories, stores and restaurants were set ablaze in the city of Karachi, where 17 people have been killed and dozens injured, officials said.

Pakistanis remained on edge on Saturday after protesters torched shops, lorries, welfare centers and ambulances overnight.

"There's a lot of rioting going on in my neighborhood, Clifton. Everything has been burned up. Shops have been looted," Ali Khan, 36, country manager for Audi Pakistan, told Reuters as he stood outside his Audi garage in Karachi's business district.

Masked gunmen in the city shot dead a 27-year-old man wearing a tunic made from the PPP flag on Saturday. He had just shouted "Bhutto is great" while returning from the mausoleum where Bhutto was buried on Friday, police said.

Nearly deserted streets

Army, police and paramilitary troops patrolled the nearly deserted streets of Bhutto's home city of Larkana, where rioting left shops at a jewelry market smoldering.

Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif led a 47-member delegation of other opposition leaders to meet with Bhutto's family to express condolences, said Sadiq ul-Farooq, spokesman for Sharif's party.

President Pervez Musharraf called Bhutto's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, promising to make every effort to bring the attackers to justice, state-run Pakistan Television reported.

The government blamed Bhutto's killing on al-Qaida and Taliban militants operating with increasing impunity in the lawless tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan. It released a transcript Friday of a purported conversation between Mehsud and another militant, apparently discussing the assassination.

"It was a spectacular job. They were very brave boys who killed her," Mehsud said, according to the transcript.

Interior Ministry spokesman Javed Iqbal Cheema described Mehsud as an al-Qaida leader who was also behind the Karachi bomb blast in October against Bhutto that killed more than 140 people.

But a spokesman for Mehsud, Maulana Mohammed Umer, denied the militant was involved in the attack and dismissed the allegations as "government propaganda."

"We strongly deny it. Baitullah Mehsud is not involved in the killing of Benazir Bhutto," he said in a telephone call he made to The Associated Press from the tribal region of South Waziristan.

"The fact is that we are only against America, and we don't consider political leaders of Pakistan our enemy," he said, adding he was speaking on instructions from Mehsud.

Mehsud heads Tehrik-i-Taliban, a newly formed coalition of Islamic militants committed to waging holy war against the government, which is a key U.S. ally in its war on terror.

Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party accused the government of trying to frame Mehsud, saying the militant — through emissaries — had previously told Bhutto he was not involved in the Karachi bombing.

"The story that al-Qaida or Baitullah Mehsud did it appears to us to be a planted story, an incorrect story, because they want to divert the attention," said Farhatullah Babar, a spokesman for Bhutto's party.

After the Karachi attack, Bhutto accused elements in the ruling pro-Musharraf party of plotting to kill her. The government denied the claims. Babar said Bhutto's allegations were never investigated.

Cause of death?

Bhutto was killed Thursday evening when a suicide attacker shot at her and then blew himself up as she left a rally in the garrison city of Rawalpindi near Islamabad. The attack killed about 20 others as well. Authorities initially said she died from bullet wounds, and a surgeon who treated her said the impact from shrapnel on her skull killed her.

But Cheema said she was killed when she tried to duck back into the armored vehicle during the attack, and the shock waves from the blast smashed her head into a lever attached to the sunroof, fracturing her skull, he said.

The government said it was forming two inquiries into Bhutto's death, one to be carried out by a high court judge and another by security forces.

On Saturday, about half a dozen police investigators were still sifting through evidence and

taking measurements at the scene of the attack. More than a dozen officers diverted traffic and provided security for the investigators.

A close aide who prepared Bhutto's body for burial dismissed as "ludicrous" a government theory that she died after hitting her head on a sunroof during the suicide attack.

Sherry Rehman, a spokeswoman for Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), said Bhutto was shot in the head. But the government stuck to its version, saying Bhutto's party was welcome to exhume her corpse to check.

Country in chaos

Bhutto's killing plunged the country into chaos for a third day as mobs continued to wreak havoc across the country. Business centers, gas stations and schools were closed and many roads were deserted.

Rioters in Karachi set fire to three factories, a restaurant, two shops and several vehicles, said Ehtisham Uddin, a local fire official. Doctors at hospitals in the city said 26 people were wounded overnight by gunshots, many of them fired by protesters.

Karachi police chief Azhar Farooqi said 17 people were killed in the city in the violence and other officials said dozens were injured. Police arrested 250 people, Farooqi said. More than two dozen people have been killed nationwide, official said.

Desperate to quell the violence, the government sent troops into several cities. Soldiers patrolled several Karachi neighborhoods Saturday, and residents complained of shortages of food and gasoline.

Burned out vehicles littered the road from Larkana to Karachi, and hundreds of people tried to hitch rides along the route. Protesters burned tires, and markets were deserted.

Train service in parts of the south were suspended because "of the bad law and order situation," a rail official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

The army positioned 20 battalions of troops for deployment across Sindh province if they were needed to stop the violence, according to a military statement.

Bhutto's death plunged the nation deep into turmoil less than two weeks before parliamentary elections. The government said it has no plans to postpone the Jan. 8 poll despite a boycott by key opposition parties.

While many grieving Pakistanis turned to violence, hundreds of thousands of others paid their last respects Friday to the popular opposition leader as she was laid to rest beside her father in her family's marble mausoleum.

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