

Benazir Bhutto Named Five to Investigate should she be assassinated

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Ms Bhutto, in a letter to Gen Musharraf of October 16 before she returned to Pakistan, had named five former and serving officials who should be investigated in the event that she was assassinated on her return to Pakistan.

These include IB chief Ijaz Shah, Mr Sharif's former top spook Imtiaz Billa, former ISI chief Hameed Gul, special prosecutor for NAB Waseem Afzal and Sindh Chief Minister Arbab Ghulam Rahim. One of the six "suspicious" cell numbers cited in her letter led to several arrests, according to the intelligence sources.

Bhutto Assassinated in Attack on Rally
By SALMAN MASOOD and GRAHAM BOWLEY

RAWALPINDI, Pakistan — The Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto was assassinated near the capital, Islamabad, on Thursday. Witnesses said Ms. Bhutto, who was appearing at a political campaign rally, was fired upon at close range by a gunman, and then struck by shrapnel from a blast that the government said was caused by a suicide bomber.

Ms. Bhutto, who had twice been the country's prime minister and was a leading contender to be the next prime minister after elections in January, was declared dead by doctors at a hospital in Rawalpindi at 6:16 p.m. local time. At least a dozen more people were killed in the attack, and some reports said there were at least 20 dead.

The exact circumstances surrounding the assassination were still unclear. Senior officials in Ms. Bhutto's party said she had finished addressing the rally and was sitting in a car waving at the crowd when she was hit in the head by a sniper in a nearby building. They said the car moved on for another 50 yards before a suicide attacker blew himself up.

Other witnesses described a single assassin opening fire on Ms. Bhutto and her entourage, hitting her at least once in the neck and once in the chest, before blowing himself up. Dr. Abbas Hayat, professor of pathology at Rawalpindi General Hospital where Ms. Bhutto was taken, said doctors tried to revive her for 35 minutes, but that she had shrapnel wounds and head injuries and was in heart failure. He said he could not confirm whether she had bullet injuries.

The assassination raises the threat of violent protests by her supporters around the country with reports that some had already taken to the streets in Karachi and other cities. In a brief televised address, President Pervez Musharraf called for support from the Pakistani people and declared three days of mourning. "This is a great tragedy which I cannot describe in words," he said, according to a report on state-run media.

He blamed terrorists for the attack, saying "Pakistan and the nation faces the greatest threat from these terrorists."

Condemnation of the assassination flowed in from around the world. In a statement, President Bush said, "The United States strongly condemns this cowardly attack by murderous extremists who are trying to undermine Pakistan's democracy." The White House said Mr. Bush would call Mr. Musharraf later today to discuss the situation.

In a statement on the United Nations Web site, Ban Ki-moon, the United Nations secretary general, called the killing "an assault on stability." Ms. Bhutto's death is the latest blow to Pakistan's treacherous political situation, and leaves her party leaderless in the short term and unable to effectively compete in hotly contested parliamentary elections that are two weeks away, according to Hasan Askari Rizvi, a leading Pakistani political and military analyst.

The assassination also adds to the enormous pressure on the Bush administration over Pakistan, which has sunk billions in aid into the country without accomplishing its main goals of finding the Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden or ending the activities of Islamic militants and the Taliban in border areas with Afghanistan.

Hundreds of supporters had gathered at Ms. Bhutto's campaign rally, which was being held at Liaquat Bagh, a park that is a common site for rallies and speeches, in Rawalpindi, the garrison city near Islamabad.

Amid the confusion after the explosion, the site was littered with pools of blood. Shoes and caps of party workers were lying on the asphalt, and shards of glass were strewn about the ground. Pakistani television cameras captured images of ambulances pushing through crowds of dazed and injured people at the scene of the assassination.

Farah Ispahani, a party official from Ms. Bhutto's party, said: "It is too soon to confirm the number of dead from the party's side. Private television channels are reporting 20 dead." Television channels were also quoting police sources as saying that at least 14 people were dead.

At the hospital where Ms. Bhutto was taken, a large number of police began to cordon off the area as angry party workers smashed windows. Many protesters shouted "Musharraf Dog." One man was crying hysterically, saying his sister had been killed. Dozens of people in the crowd beat their chests and chanted slogans against Mr. Musharraf.

Nahid Khan, a close aide to Ms. Bhutto, was sobbing in a room next to the operating theater, and the corridors of the hospital swarmed with mourners.

Ms. Bhutto had been warned by the government before her return to Pakistan that she faced threats to her security. In October, Ms. Bhutto survived another deadly suicide attack in the southern city of Karachi on the day she returned from years of self-imposed exile abroad to contest the parliamentary elections. Ms. Bhutto blamed extremist Islamic groups who she said wanted to take over the country for that attack, which narrowly missed her but killed 134 people. But she also complained that the government had taken insufficient steps to safeguard her parade.

The government has maintained that she ignored its warnings against such public gatherings and that holding them placed herself and her followers in unnecessary danger.

The assassination comes just days after Mr. Musharraf lifted a state of emergency in the country, which he had used to suspend the Constitution and arrest thousands of political opponents, and which he said he had imposed in part because of terrorist threats by extremists in Pakistan.

With frustration in Washington growing over Mr. Musharraf's shortcomings, and his delays in returning the country to civilian rule, Ms. Bhutto had become an appealing solution for the country. She was openly critical of Mr. Musharraf's ineffectiveness at dealing with Islamic militants and welcomed American involvement, unlike another Musharraf rival, the former prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

Bush administration officials began working behind the scenes over the summer to help Ms. Bhutto and Mr. Musharraf create a power-sharing deal to orchestrate a transition to democracy that would leave Mr. Musharraf in the presidency, while not making a mockery of President Bush's attempts to push democracy in the Muslim world.

Ms. Bhutto's assassination immediately raised questions about whether the parliamentary elections scheduled for January will now go ahead or be postponed. Mr. Musharraf was carrying out an emergency meeting with top government officials Thursday following Ms. Bhutto's death, the aide to Mr. Musharraf said. He said no decision had been made on whether to delay the national elections.

The assassination is likely to bring renewed attention to Pakistan's security agencies. Ms. Bhutto had long accused the country's main military intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI, of working against her and her party because they opposed her liberal, secular agenda.

In a letter she sent to Mr. Musharraf just before her return to Pakistan in October, she listed "three individuals and more" who she said in the event that she was assassinated should be investigated for their sympathies with extremist militants.

An aide close to Ms. Bhutto said that one of those named in the letter was Ijaz Shah, the director general of the Intelligence Bureau, another of the country's intelligence agencies and a close associate of Mr. Musharraf.

The second official was the head of the country's National Accountability Bureau, which had investigated Ms. Bhutto on corruption charges. The third was a former official in Punjab province who had mistreated her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, when he was in jail awaiting trial on corruption charges.

Ms. Bhutto never publicly confirmed the three names in the letter and it was unclear how many names it actually included. She complained that the government investigation into the Karachi assassination attempt was not thorough and called for an independent international investigation. Since then, she had continued to accuse the government of doing too little to protect her while campaigning for nationwide elections.

In an interview after Ms. Bhutto released the letter, a close aide to Mr. Musharraf said the people named in the letter

were all political enemies of Ms. Bhutto. He said they did not have sympathy with militants and the government was doing all it could to protect Ms. Bhutto. He said that militants had repeatedly vowed to kill Ms. Bhutto, who had vowed to crack down on religious extremists, and he blamed them for the Karachi attack. In a telephone interview Thursday, the same aide blamed militants for Ms. Bhutto's assassination.

But Pakistani analysts said that many Pakistanis — in particular Ms. Bhutto's supporters -- are unlikely to accept that militants carried out the attack. At the least, they will accuse the government of doing too little to protect Ms. Bhutto.

"The ultimate responsibility for such events is the government," said Rasul Baksh Rais, a political scientist at the Lahore University of Management Sciences. "I don't think people are going to buy the theory that this was the terrorists."

The aide to Mr. Musharraf dismissed complaints from members of Ms. Bhutto's party that the government failed to provide adequate security for Ms. Bhutto.

Asked if the bombing was planned in the country's lawless tribal areas — where Mr. bin Laden and other Qaeda members are thought to be hiding — the aide to Mr. Musharraf said "must be, must be." Militants based in the country's tribal areas have carried out a record number of suicide bombings in Pakistan this year.

Ms. Bhutto, 54, returned to Pakistan this year at a time of great volatility in a state that has been under military rule for eight years. She was the leader of the country's largest opposition political party, founded by her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, one of Pakistan's most flamboyant and democratically inclined prime ministers.

Officials in neighboring India instantly condemned the assassination but stopped short of apportioning blame or commenting on its implications for democracy in Pakistan. The Indian foreign minister, Pranab Mukherjee, called Ms. Bhutto a "brave and outstanding woman leader of the subcontinent."

Ms. Bhutto's "contributions to democracy, to the improvement of India-Pakistan relations, and to the restoration of normalcy within Pakistan will be an inspiration," he told reporters.

In a statement, the office of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh credited her for having "left a deep imprint on her time and age."

The assassination dominated Indian television news coverage Thursday night. Indians are close observers of Pakistani politics and Ms. Bhutto in particular has long been a figure of particular fascination.

She visited New Delhi last March, to speak to a gathering of India's political and corporate elite. She was introduced as having been born to a family of martyrs and greeted with wild applause.

Salman Masood reported from Islamabad, Pakistan, and Graham Bowley and David Rohde from New York.