

Heavy toll in Pakistan mosque assault

by UPI

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan -- Pakistani forces early Tuesday stormed Islamabad's Red Mosque, killing dozens of radical Islamic students who had refused to surrender despite warnings.

The force, under orders to take the mosque and an adjacent women's religious school, began the assault after hours of negotiations failed to convince the remaining militants occupying the complex to surrender and end the week-long standoff. The forces met with stiff resistance from those inside.

The Financial Times quoted military officials as saying at least 40 militants and three security personnel were killed in the first hours of the assault.

The standoff began last Tuesday following fierce gun battles in which several died and led to the surrender of some 1,200 radical Islamic students. However, the more militant ones continued to hide in the mosque to press their demands for imposition of Sharia laws in the capital.

It was not clear how many militants were still barricaded inside but authorities earlier had said they were holding some of the women and children hostage.

The Times, quoting an intelligence official, said the prolonged surrender negotiations prior to the assault broke down because the mosque's chief cleric, Abdul Rashid Ghazi, wanted immunity not only for himself and his family members, but for a group of militants, some of whom may be foreigners.

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