

Well Done

Dozens killed in Kabul suicide attack

AFGHANISTAN

Shiites targeted on holy day; Pakistani extremist group claims responsibility

BY ALI SAFI
McClatchy Newspapers

KABUL, Afghanistan — At least 55 people were killed and scores wounded Tuesday in a suicide attack that targeted Shiite Muslim worshippers in Kabul, raising the specter of sectarian violence even as the United States searches for a way out of the Afghan war.

The strike, reportedly carried out by an obscure Pakistani extremist group with ties to the Taliban, was the first major attack on Afghanistan's Shiite minority of the decade-long war. It occurred on Ashoura, the holiest day of the Shiite calendar, as worshippers were commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, in the seventh century.

The U.S. government said Wednesday that an American citizen was killed in the bombing. Embassy spokeswoman Megan Ellis said the American victim was not a U.S. government employee, but she declined to give any further details.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Almi, a breakaway faction of the well-known Pakistani extremist outfit Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, claimed responsibility for the attack in a phone call to Radio Mashaal, a Pashto-language station set up by Radio Free Europe. Pashto is spoken in northwest Pakistan and



MASSOUD HOSSAINI / AFP/GETTY IMAGES
Shiite Muslim worshippers run from an explosion during a religious ceremony in Kabul on Tuesday.

southern Afghanistan, and it's the language of the Taliban.

Afghanistan's Shiites are mostly members of the Hazara ethnic minority, which suffered brutal discrimination at the hands of the Taliban government that ruled the country before the 2001 U.S.-led invasion. The attacks came as representatives from the United States and some 90 other nations and organizations concluded a meeting in Germany about the transition of security responsibilities to Afghan forces, which are to take full control of the country by 2014.

The Taliban also condemned the blast in a statement, saying, "This is part of a plot by the enemies of Islam

are based.

"The enemies of religion, our soil and homeland did this act," said Abdul Wali, 37, whose cousin was killed. Wali was waiting outside the Kabul military hospital to retrieve his cousin's body. "There is no justification for such an inhuman, un-Islamic and unforgivable act, which was carried out by enemies of Islam and Afghanistan," said Mufti Shams Frotan, an Afghan religious scholar.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Almi is a small faction based in Pakistan's tribal area. It's considered an even more radical offshoot of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a murderous anti-Shiite group founded in 1996. Both groups act as surrogates for al-Qaida.

From its start as a sectarian organization, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi has taken on the broader jihadist agenda of al-Qaida. It works closely with the Pakistani Taliban, who also have roots in anti-Shiite violence.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi was the training ground for the leader of the Pakistani Taliban, Hakimullah Mehsud, and it operated training camps in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime. The organization is thought to be behind the December 2009 bombing of a Shiite procession in Karachi that killed more than 30 people.

The parent organization also is thought to have staged some of the most audacious attacks in Pakistan, including the September 2008 bombing of the Marriott hotel in Islamabad.

Information from The Associated Press is included.

Related developments

Pakistan thanks Taliban: Pakistan's Interior Minister Rehman Malik thanked the country's Taliban militant movement Tuesday for not staging attacks during this year's Shiite ritual of Ashoura. The Pakistani Taliban have claimed responsibility for hundreds of suicide bombings over the past five years that have killed thousands as part of a campaign to replace the secular government with a hard-line Islamist one. Members regard Shiites as infidels and believe killing them is a religious obligation.

Iraq killings: On Monday, five bomb attacks against Shiite pilgrims killed 21 people, revealing the troubling gaps that remain in Iraq's security just weeks before all U.S. forces must be out of the country under a Dec. 31 withdrawal deadline. Iraqi police boosted security as hundreds of thousands of pilgrims converged Tuesday on the holy city of Karbala for a 10-day religious ritual that regularly draws deadly attacks by Sunni extremists.

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