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McClatchy Newspapers

Suicide bombings target Afghanistan government offices, kill 19

By ALI SAFI
4/10/2012

At least 19 people, many of them police officers, died and dozens of others were injured Tuesday in three suicide attacks on government buildings in western and southern Afghanistan, officials said.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for two strikes on a police compound in southern Helmand province, an insurgent stronghold from which the Obama administration plans to withdraw U.S. forces later this year.

The third and bloodiest attack took place in Herat, a western province where U.S.-led NATO forces turned security over to Afghan forces last year.

President Hamid Karzai condemned the violence, saying in a statement, "The killing of women and children in the sacred religion of Islam is considered an evil act and cowardice."

Twelve people died and 29 others, including five women, were wounded when two insurgents detonated explosive vests and a cargo of explosives after guards stopped their vehicle entering the district governor's compound in Guzara district, near the Herat provincial airport.

One of the attackers was draped in a burqa, the body-length shroud worn by many women in Afghanistan and other conservative Islamic countries, said Gen. Sayed Agha Saqib, the provincial police chief. He said the bombers detonated their explosives at the entrance to the district chief's office, where Afghan civilians were waiting to get inside.

Afghan television stations broadcast scenes of bloody mayhem, with bodies and vehicle parts strewn around the entrance.

The attackers were being pursued by an Afghan intelligence official, who had earlier spotted their vehicle and called a warning to the compound's guards to block the gate, Saqib said.

He said he didn't believe that the compound was the bombers' original target and that they may have diverted there after becoming aware of their pursuer.

"The target of the attack could have been Herat airport where NATO troops are based or Afghan or foreign officials who use this road that connects the city with the airfield," said Saqib.

A 4-year-old child was among nine civilians who died, he said. Three police officers also were killed.

In the first incident in Helmand province, Afghan officials said that four police officers were killed and five others were wounded, including the police chief of the restive Musa Qala district, Abdul Wali Koka.

Daud Ahmadi, a spokesman for the provincial governor, Gulab Mangal, said that three attackers wearing suicide vests and riding in a Japanese-made car drove up to Koka's headquarters. They parked their vehicle in front of the headquarters, entered the base and opened fire on police, Ahmadi said in a telephone interview.

"The three suicide vests were defused after the attackers were shot by the police," Ahmadi said.

The Afghan Interior Ministry issued a slightly different version of events, saying that while police shot dead one of the attackers, the two others detonated their vests.

An hour later, as police reinforcements arrived, a suicide bomber drove up on a motorcycle and detonated his explosive vest, killing three more police officers and wounding four others. Two civilians also were injured, Ahmadi said.

Helmand is Afghanistan's largest poppy-growing province, and its production of opium provides the Taliban with an important source of income. A statement from the governor's office said the two attacks were part of a Taliban effort to halt a poppy eradication campaign.