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Suicide Bomber Kills Dozens of Worshipers in Afghanistan

By ALISSA J. RUBIN and SANGAR RAHIMI
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A suicide bomber struck in northern Afghanistan on Friday morning, killing at least 45 people, just as worshipers were emerging from a mosque to celebrate the first day of Id al-Adha, the most important Muslim holiday, officials said. It was one of several attacks in Afghanistan on Friday, and by far the most lethal.

The attack, in Maimana, the capital of Faryab Province, also wounded 60 people.

Among the dead were 25 members of the Afghan national security forces, including the commander of the Afghan National Civil Order Police for Faryab, the head of the police quick-reaction force and the chiefs of police for two districts of Maimana, said Naqibullah Faiq, a member of Parliament from Faryab.

President Hamid Karzai condemned the attack. “Those who are taking away the happiness of Muslims during the Id al-Adha days are the enemies of Islam, and you cannot call them human or Muslim,” he said in a statement.

Dr. Maroof Samar, a surgeon at a government hospital, said, “The hospital is overwhelmed by dead and wounded bodies; all off-duty doctors were called in.” Dr. Samar said he ran to the hospital from the mosque, where he was among the worshipers.

The province has become increasingly violent over the last year, and it now rivals Kunduz Province for the distinction of being the most troubled province in northern Afghanistan, Western diplomats say. Unlike southern Afghanistan, where the power struggles and attacks are among Pashtuns, the north has troubles tinged with ethnic bias. Ethnic Uzbeks make up a majority in Faryab, and there are smaller groups of ethnic Tajiks and Pashtuns.

A provincial reconstruction team run by Norwegians had been operating in Maimana, but the last of its members left in September, and most of the American military personnel deployed in the province have closed their outposts, local officials said.

Provincial officials who have been fighting the Taliban in Faryab were especially upset, because there had been hopes that recent battles with the insurgents had sapped their strength.

However, it appeared that the attack on Friday was in revenge for Taliban losses earlier in the week. On Wednesday, Afghan security forces fought a battle with Taliban militants in the Pashtun Kot District, killing the shadow governor — the man who ran the Taliban government in the province — and 24 of his men, said Abdul Sattar Bariz, the deputy provincial governor.

Dr. Samar, the surgeon, said: “Everyone was thinking that after their shadow governor was killed, they would not be able to survive anymore in Faryab. So this could be revenge for the shadow governor’s death.”

A Taliban spokesman, Qari Yusuf Ahmadi, said he had not heard about the attack and requested details so he could check with Taliban fighters in the province. No group took responsibility for the attack.

The provincial council chairman, Rahmatullah Rais, a hard-line opponent of the Taliban, said: “No Muslim would target other Muslims at the mosque. This is not the work of a Muslim. Even an infidel won’t attack a Muslim in the holy days of Id al-Adha.”

The Id al-Adha services are among the most heavily attended, and worshipers frequently overflow from mosques. Larger mosques in Afghanistan are typically surrounded on three sides by courtyards to accommodate those who pray outside and listen to the sermon and prayers over loudspeakers.

Witnesses said the bomber on Friday approached the northern courtyard gate. He was wearing the uniform of an Afghan National Army soldier, several people said.

“The suicide bomber was young. He appeared to be a 15-year-old boy,” said Syed Abdul Sarwar, a witness. “The explosion was very heavy, and all those leaving the north gate at that time were killed, including some police.”

Doctors at the local hospital said four children were killed. Mr. Faiq, the member of Parliament, said: “The children’s dead bodies were still in the hospital. They were wearing their new clothing and clutching their toys in their hands or their pockets.”

It is traditional for parents to buy toys for their children for the holiday. “It would bring tears to anyone’s eyes,” he said.

In a separate episode in Laghman Province in eastern Afghanistan, the Taliban buried a bomb near the grave of a young man they had killed two weeks before because he worked for a member of the Afghan Parliament, said Gen. Zaman Mamozai, an Interior Ministry official who is a distant relative of the victim. When two of the young man’s nephews went to visit his grave for Id al-Adha, the bomb detonated, killing one boy and wounding the other, General Mamozai said.