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78 killed in attack on Shias in Quetta

2/17/2013

* *More than 200 wounded as a remote-controlled bomb planted near the pillar of a building in a bazaar in Hazara town explodes*

* *Mob pelts police with stones*



QUETTA: A remote-controlled bomb targeting Shias killed 78 people including women and children and wounded more than 200 in Quetta on Saturday, police and officials said.

The bomb exploded in Hazara town, an area dominated by Shias on the outskirts of Quetta, capital of Balochistan province. "At least 78 people have been killed and at least 200 more wounded. The death toll may rise. It was a remote-controlled bomb," Wazir Khan Nasir, senior police officer in Quetta, told AFP.

"It was a sectarian attack, the Shia community was the target," he added.

Azhar Ali Shah, a second police officer, confirmed the death toll, which had initially been put at 10. Provincial home secretary Akbar Hussain Durrani told AFP that the dead included women and children. "We fear more casualties. We have announced an emergency in hospitals," he said. Durrani said the bomb was planted near the pillar of a building in a bazaar. "The building collapsed due to the intensity of the bomb, some people have been trapped inside," he said.

Officials and witnesses said an angry mob surrounded the area after the blast and were not allowing policemen, rescue workers and reporters to reach the site. "They were angry and started a protest, some of them pelted police with stones," home secretary Akbar Hussain Durrani told AFP. "Some of them were armed and were firing gunshots in the air, later they allowed police and rescue workers to reach on spot," he added. An AFP photographer counted 30 dead bodies in only one hospital.

Burned school bags and books were strewn around.

"I saw many bodies of women and children," said an eyewitness at a hospital. "At least a dozen people were burned to death by the blast."

The bodies and injured were moved to Combined Military Hospital Quetta, Bolan Medical Complex hospital and Civil Hospital. According to the hospital sources, condition of several injured is critical. Reacting to the incident, Majlis-e-Wahdate Muslimeen has given strike call for Sunday while Tahaffuz-e-Azadar Council has announced seven days of mourning to condemn the killing. Main markets and commercial areas in the city were closed soon after the incident.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, which intelligence officials say has become a major security threat, claimed responsibility for the attack. President Asif Zardari strongly condemned the blast and directed the authorities concerned to provide best medical assistance to the injured. He expressed sympathies with the bereaved families and reiterated the resolve of the government to continue its fight against the militants undeterred till its logical conclusion. Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf reiterated the resolve of his government to fight and eliminate the menace of terrorism from Pakistan and said that terrorists would not be able to subdue 'our will through such dastardly acts'.

Balochistan, which borders Iran and Afghanistan, has increasingly become a flashpoint for sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shias, who account for around a fifth of the country's 180 million people. At least 92 people were killed and 121 wounded on January 10, when two suicide bombers blew themselves up at a crowded snooker club in an area of Quetta city dominated by the Shia community.

It was Pakistan's worst sectarian bombing, claimed by Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.

Pakistani Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf later the same month sacked the provincial government in Balochistan after meeting Shia protesters demanding protection. Most Western intelligence agencies have regarded the Pakistani Taliban and al Qaeda as the gravest threat to nuclear-armed Pakistan, a strategic US ally. agencies