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The National

Bomb attacks in Iran and Pakistan target Shiite pilgrims

Loveday Morris

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Relatives of those killed in a suicide attack identify bodies at a hospital in Karachi. The hospital was the site of another attack just hours later. Reuters

Both Karbala and Karachi were rocked by double suicide bombings yesterday, targeting Shiite pilgrims during one of their holiest religious festivals and killing at least 65 people in both cities.

More than one million Shiites had gathered in the sacred Iraqi city of Karbala for the culmination of the Arbaeen festival, which marks the end of 40 days of mourning for the death of Hussein ibn Ali, the Prophet Mohammed's grandson. The attacks killed at least 41 people and injured another 140, hospital sources said.

In Pakistan, a suicide bomber on motorbike rammed a bus full of pilgrims on their way to a procession, killing 12. Hours later, a second motorbike bomber attacked the emergency ward of a hospital where the wounded were being treated, taking the death toll to 25. "We always see terrorists taking advantage of these festivals because of the opportunity they create for mass killings directed towards the Shia," said Mustafa Alani, an expert in security and terrorism at the Gulf Research Centre in Dubai. "It's common in both countries but sectarian attacks like this existed in Pakistan long before they came to Iraq."

The Iraq bombings took place in Qantarat al Salam, just east of Karbala. Two explosives-packed cars were detonated on either side of a bridge that pilgrims used to cross in and out of the city, the BBC reported. There were also reports of a mortar attack on a crowd.

The bombings came despite stepped-up security for the festival, with 30,000 police and soldiers on duty in the city.

It was the third major attack on pilgrims in Iraq this week. A bomb on a cart killed 20 on Wednesday near the city, while more than 40 were killed on the outskirts of Baghdad on Monday as they began the march to Karbala. Many pilgrims travel to the holy city by foot to demonstrate their piety.

“We were walking back home in groups after we finished our rites and all of a sudden a huge explosion happened. I saw the balls of fire and smoke rise from the scene ahead,” Muhammad Nasir, 31, a day labourer being treated at a hospital told Reuters. “People were running away. Security forces cordoned the scene off. There were pieces of flesh scattered around.”

Shiites in Pakistan have also been targeted over the past months. On December 28, at least 43 were killed in a procession in Karachi. After the first blast yesterday in the city of 18 million, people had gathered at the site to chant anti-government slogans.

This year Arbaeen comes at a time of already heightened sectarian tension in the lead up to March 7 elections in Iraq. Sentiment has been running high following the integrity and accountability committee’s decision to ban a list of 500 largely Sunni politicians from standing due to their past ties to the Baath party. Members of the once dominant Sunni minority saw the move as an attempt to marginalise them, and there were calls to boycott the election.

An appeals panel has lifted the ban until it can review individual candidates, a decision that was met with anger from Shiite parties with accusations of bowing to foreign pressure. The decision is scheduled to be debated in parliament on Sunday but there are fears that the contentious issue will lead to an escalation of violence as the vote approaches.