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Taliban bomber kills dozens at Afghan government office

Hashim Shukoor

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KABUL, Afghanistan — A suicide attacker blew himself up at a government office Monday in northern Afghanistan, killing at least 32 and wounding 31 people, mostly those in line to get identity cards, local officials said.

While U.S.-led coalition forces are making gains against the Taliban in the south, insurgents are spreading violence to other parts of the country. The intended target of Monday's attack may have been a meeting of police in an adjacent building, which would be part of a pattern of striking at law enforcement in recent weeks.

The bombing happened around 12:30 p.m. local time at the entrance of the census office of Imam Sahib district, north of Kunduz city, the capital of Kunduz province.

"The security has got better in the province and people want to get on with their lives, so they had come to get identity cards," said Anwar Jegdalik, the governor of Kunduz province.

The Taliban claimed responsibility, saying in a statement: "All those killed were the ones wanting to be enlisted and become a formal member of militia puppets." The insurgents never acknowledge killing civilians.

The district chief, Mohammad Ayoub Haqyar, said one police officer was among the dead.

At the time of the explosion, police were meeting in an adjacent building to discuss how to raise a force of Afghan Local Police, a new U.S.-backed plan for additional security forces in each district.

The blast was so powerful that it shattered the windows of the meeting room and surrounding offices, Haqyar said.

"The target of the attacker was our meeting, but he was not able to get into it so he detonated himself in the next building," Haqyar said. "The Taliban cannot confront us face to face, so they plant mines or carry out suicide attacks."

Earlier this month, the Taliban carried out a series of sophisticated attacks on police targets in the southern province of Kandahar and the eastern province of Nangarhar.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai said: "The recent attacks where innocent lives were lost clearly demonstrate the very evil and anti-Islamic nature of this cruel enemy, who desperately seek to slaughter and bereave families."

U.S. Navy Rear Adm. Vic Beck, the public affairs director for the International Security Assistance Force, said in a statement: "In direct contradiction to (Taliban leader) Mullah Omar's highly touted proclamation prohibiting insurgents from harming Afghan civilians, today they once again demonstrated their true disregard for the safety of the Afghan people."

Kunduz province is on the border with Tajikistan in northern Afghanistan, which provides a vital supply route for the U.S.-led coalition forces. About 3,000 coalition soldiers, mostly Germans, are stationed in Kunduz. It was a peaceful province until 2007, when coalition forces began using the highway through the province as one of their main supply routes.