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Al Jazeera

Deadly suicide blasts rock Kabul

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At least 17 people were killed and 32 wounded when several suicide bombers attacked a hotel popular with foreigners and the surrounding area in the centre of Kabul.

The Taliban have claimed responsibility for Friday's attack, one of the deadliest attacks on the Afghan capital in a year.



Ten Indians, an Italian and a Frenchman were among the dead, officials said.

Attacks on guesthouses used by foreigners have increased in recent months.

The first blast occurred at about 06:45 local time, near the Kabul City Centre, Kabul's largest shopping centre located in the city's main commercial district, that includes the Safi Landmark Hotel.

That was followed by two smaller explosions.

Sporadic gunfire was heard in the area as ambulances raced to the scene and grey smoke billowed into the air.

Police say at least two police officers were among those killed in the blasts.

A Taliban spokesman claimed the attack.

The Reuters news agency quoted Zabiullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, as saying "holy warriors" had "managed to attack in the heart of Kabul city once again."

The spokesman said at least five Taliban fighters launched the attack, including two suicide bombers who detonated explosives-packed vests near the hotel and a shopping mall, Reuters reported.

'Crying and shouting'

Witnesses said people in pyjamas were led from the Park Resident hotel and taken away in ambulances

Najibullah, a 25-year-old hotel worker, said he ran out of the hotel when he heard the first explosion. He said he saw two suicide bombers on the site.

"I saw foreigners were crying and shouting," he said.

"It was a very bad situation inside. God helped me; otherwise I would be dead. I saw one suicide bomber blowing himself up on the first floor of the hotel."

The Park Residence was attacked in mid-2005, when a suicide bomber struck the hotel's Internet cafe.

Taliban 'message'

Al Jazeera's correspondent in Kabul, Hoda Abdel-Hamid, said: "Explosions and the sound of intense gunfire, followed by sporadic gunfire, were heard in the heart of Kabul this morning.

"There is a concern that as the Nato push against the Taliban goes on, these types of attacks will increase as a result.

"The Taliban is showing that they too are very strong-willed and that they will attack anywhere and anytime they want.

"An attack like this one sends a message that no one is really safe, that even a city like Kabul, with heavy security, is not safe from the conflict anymore," she said.

The bombing is the first attack in the Afghan capital since January 18, when teams of suicide bombers and gunmen targeted government buildings in the centre of the city, leaving 12 dead, including seven attackers.

It is also the first attack in Kabul since the start of a major Nato-led offensive against Taliban fighters in Afghanistan's Helmand province.

Our correspondent said that since Operation Moshtarak began 12 days ago, Kabul has been largely safe although attacks have occurred elsewhere in Afghanistan.

Nato 'outrage'

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Nato secretary-general, expressed outrage over Friday's dawn attacks.

"I strongly condemn the terrorist attack which took place this morning in Kabul," Rasmussen said in a statement.

"Once again, the enemies of Afghanistan have killed innocent civilians, Afghans and international workers alike."

After 12 days of fighting, Brigadier General Larry Nicholson, commander of US marines in southern Afghanistan, had welcomed Thursday's flag-hoisting in Marjah as "a new beginning" as Afghan government authority was restored.

Afghans "believe there is a fresh start for Marjah under the government of Afghanistan", he said as the country's flag was hoisted by the governor of Helmand province in front of several hundred residents.

Humanitarian groups have said residents are facing deteriorating conditions as food, medicine and other supplies run dangerously low and innumerable Taliban-planted bombs make movement in and out of Marjah perilous.