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Suicide bombers kill 24 in south-eastern Afghanistan

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Kabul - Twenty-four people died and nearly 60 were injured by three suicide bombers who attacked a road construction company in south-eastern Afghanistan, an official said Monday.

The bombers shot their way into the firm's compound in Bermal district of Paktika province Sunday night before detonating their explosive-laden truck, Interior Ministry spokesman Zamarai Bashary said.

'According to the latest information, 24 employees of the firm were killed and 59 others were injured in the attack,' Mukhles Afghan, spokesman for the provincial governor, said.

Officials said all the victims were civilian labourers and guards protecting the compound.

Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement sent to media that said 21 Afghan and foreign troops were killed and 27 others were injured.

He said a bomber named Ali Ahmad detonated the truck loaded with four and half tons of explosives inside the compound.

President Hamid Karzai condemned the attack as an 'unforgivable crime' and vowed that it would not deter Afghans from rebuilding their country.

'The insurgents have started targeting soft targets because they can not target NATO and Afghan security forces anymore,' General Joseph Blotz, spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, said Monday.

Eastern Afghanistan has seen an intensified insurgent attacks in recent months following US-led military offensives against Taliban fighters in their traditional southern strongholds.

Most of the fighters operating in the east belong to Haqqani, an associated group of Taliban, which according to Afghan and US officials have bases inside the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Insurgents claimed to have taken hostage 50 Afghan policemen in the eastern province of Kunar on Sunday. Afghan officials confirmed having lost contact with up to 40 off-duty police personnel who were en route to their home town when they went missing.