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AP News

## Afghanistan: 12 killed in protest at UN office

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Eight foreigners were killed Friday after demonstrators protesting a reported burning of the Muslim holy book stormed a U.N. office in northern Afghanistan, opening fire on guards and setting fires inside the compound, a top Afghan police official said.

The topic of Quran burning stirred outrage among millions of Muslims and others worldwide after a small American church in Florida threatened to destroy the holy book last year. The Florida pastor had backed down but purportedly went through with the burning last month, prompting protests in three Afghan cities.

Munir Ahmad Farhad, a spokesman in Balkh province, said the protest in Mazar-i-Sharif began peacefully when several hundred demonstrators gathered outside the U.N. mission's compound to denounce the Quran's destruction.

It turned violent when some protesters grabbed weapons from the U.N. guards and opened fire on the police, then stormed the building, he said. "I can see the smoke over the compound," he said.

Gen. Daud Daud, commander of Afghan National Police in several northern provinces, said those killed included five Nepalese guards who were working for the U.N. and two other foreigners employed at the complex. He said one other foreigner was wounded. Later, Rawof Taj, deputy police chief in Balkh province, said the injured individual had died.

Dan McNorton, a spokesman for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, confirmed that people working for the U.N. had died in an attack on the operation center, but he could not provide details.

"The situation is still confusing and we are currently working to ascertain all the facts and take care of all our staff," he said from his office in Kabul.

Staffan de Mistura, the top U.N. official in Afghanistan, had left Kabul for Mazar-i-Sharif to personally handle the situation, he said.

Mohammad Azim, a businessman in Mazer-i-Sharif, said that clerics with loudspeakers drove around the city in two cars on Thursday to invite residents to the protest. After Friday prayers at a large blue mosque in the city center, clerics again called on worshippers to attend a peaceful protest.

Several hundred people also protested the reported Quran burning at several sites in Herat, a city in western Afghanistan. Protesters burned a U.S. flag at a sports stadium in Herat and chanted "Death to the U.S." and "They broke the heart of Islam."

About 100 people also gathered at a traffic circle near the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. Police directed traffic around the demonstration in the capital. One protester carried a sign that said: "We want these bloody bastard Americans with all their forces to leave Afghanistan."

The protesters were condemning a reported burning of the Quran at the Rev. Terry Jones' small church, Dove Outreach Center, in Gainesville, Florida. The church's website stated that after a five-hour trial on March 20, the Quran "was found guilty and a copy was burned inside the building." A picture on the website shows a book in flames in a small portable fire pit.

Last week, Afghan President Hamid Karzai issued a statement calling the burning a "crime against a religion." He denounced it as a "disrespectful and abhorrent act" and called on the U.S. and the United Nations to bring to justice those who burned the holy book and issue a response to Muslims around the world.