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Al Jazeera

Deadly Taliban attack in western Afghanistan

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At least five people have been killed after armed men launched multiple attacks in the western Afghanistan city of Herat, Al Jazeera's correspondent in Kabul says.

Qais Azimy said the dead in Monday's attack included an Afghan soldier.

"The governor and police chief had a press conference and they confirmed the number of dead as 5, including one Afghan army soldier, and 33 injured," he said.

"We are hearing from a security source that Taliban fighters have taken hostage a family ... which was living in a house which they [Taliban] first attacked.

"In the press conference, the governor and the police chief confirmed that they both did have some information from two months ago that Herat city could be a target."

Fighting rages

Fighting continued and the governor and the police chief had confirmed two other suicide attacks around the city, said our correspondent.

"And they believe still there are two fighters who have taken position in a house, and are believed to have a family hostage with them , and they are firing from that location."

In one of the attacks "four men attacked the provincial reconstruction team of the ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] building" in Herat, said the correspondent.

A second explosion targeted an area packed with people and traffic about two kilometres from the base.

Ghulam Sayed Rashid, the Herat provincial health director, said: "Among the wounded we have four children and a woman. The rest are men. Three of the injured are in critical condition."

The defence minister of Italy, which has about 3,880 troops serving in Afghanistan, the majority of them in the west, said five Italian troops had been wounded.

Reuters news agency quoted a witness as saying that he saw the bodies of several troops wearing foreign uniforms and smoke rising near the Italian-run joint civilian and military provincial reconstruction team (PRT) base.

The blasts came just weeks before the usually peaceful historic city is to become one of the first places in the war-torn country to transition from NATO to Afghan security control nearly 10 years after the 2001 US-led invasion.

Taliban claim

Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, with its spokesman, Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, telling the AFP news agency: "Our mujahideen are working on the operation in Herat."

A Reuters witness said it appeared an unknown number of fighters had entered a seven-storey building near the PRT and began opening fire on the base from there.

A spokesman for ISAF in Kabul said the force was aware of reports of the attack and was looking into them.

Television pictures from Herat showed at least two vehicles destroyed by explosions and troops scurrying for cover.

Violence has spiked across Afghanistan since the Taliban announced at the beginning of May the start of a spring offensive.

Attacks have taken place in cities across the country in recent weeks, with the government and security forces and foreign military targets singled out in increasingly bold assaults.