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Reuters

Suicide bomber hits memorial for slain Afghan general

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A suicide bomber detonated his explosives at a memorial service for the assassinated police chief of north Afghanistan Friday, killing at least four policemen, local security and health officials said.

The attack appeared to target the police chief of Kunduz province, Sameullah Qatra, whose predecessor in the post was killed by a suicide bomber in March. Qatra was near the bomber but escaped unhurt, his spokesman Sayed Sarwar Hussaini said.

A string of targeted assassinations has killed key leaders at a time when Afghan forces are preparing to start taking security control for some parts of the country from international troops.

The attacks have also demonstrated that insurgents can reach a once relatively peaceful part of the country, after an intensified NATO-led campaign reduced their power in their traditional southern heartland around Kandahar city.

The bomber detonated his explosives inside the mosque where people had gathered to mourn General Dawood Dawood, who died in a massive bomb attack late last month in neighbouring Takhar province, along with the Takhar police chief.

"As the police chief arrived at the mosque, the suicide bomber tried to approach him," Hussaini said, adding that the bomber was a neat and clean-shaven young man.

"His bodyguards had stopped the suicide bomber to search him when he blew himself up killing four policemen."

Four dead policemen were taken to the Kunduz provincial hospital, the hospital's head Zafar Noori said. The hospital treated 18 injured people, four of them civilians, he added.

LEADERS TARGETED

The Taliban last month announced the start of a long-expected "spring offensive," vowing to carry out attacks including suicide bombings on foreign and Afghan troops and government officials.

The tactic echoes efforts by the NATO-led coalition of foreign forces fighting in Afghanistan to kill and capture insurgent leaders to weaken the movement and possibly prepare the way for peace negotiations.

Insurgents have hit a string of high-profile targets in recent months, particularly in the north, but the Taliban denied responsibility for Friday's attack.

"It could be due to enmity or a grudge between rival warlord commanders, but we weren't involved," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Reuters by phone.

Religion is at the core of the Taliban's ideology and they have in the past denied any role in attacks on religious sites, even when they appear to further their military strategy.

Police spokesman Hussaini said the tactic was an insurgent hallmark. "It was definitely the work of the Taliban, no one else has business with suicide bombings," he said.

In addition to the suicide attack on Dawood and Qatra's predecessor, a mosque bombing last October killed the governor of Kunduz while he was attending Friday prayers.