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Deadly blast in southern Afghanistan

Roadside bombing in Helmand province leaves 19 dead, including women and children, according to Afghan officials.

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Twin blasts targeting Shia sites on the holy day of Ashoura left 59 people dead on Tuesday [Reuters]

The Afghan government says 19 civilians have been killed in a roadside bomb attack in southern Afghanistan, bringing the death toll to 78 in two turbulent days of violence.

Mohammad Ismail, provincial security force commander, said a minivan was hit by the bomb on while driving through Helmand province on Wednesday, and that women and children were

among the dead.

"Nineteen people including seven women and five children have been killed in today's IED [improvised explosive device] attack," said Ismail. "The seven women are from the same family."

Ismail added that five others were wounded and being treated at a NATO base.

The blasts came as the civilians travelled from provincial capital Lashkar Gah to Sangin district, historically one of the most troubled in Afghanistan.

Parts of Helmand remain highly unstable although Lashkar Gah is under the control of Afghan forces and three other districts are due to transition from NATO to Afghan security control within weeks.

The deaths came the day after 59 people died in two blasts at Shia shrines.

Ashoura massacre

At least 55 people were killed in a blast in Kabul on Tuesday while commemorating the Shia holy day of Ashoura. A second near-simultaneous strike killed four people and injured 21 in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif as a convoy of Shias was driving past.

It was not immediately clear who carried out the attacks but suspicion centred on Sunni armed groups based in neighbouring Pakistan.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who cancelled a visit to the UK to return home on Wednesday, blamed the attacks on enemies of the state.

"Without any doubt, the enemies of Afghanistan are trying to separate the Afghan people," President Hamid Karzai said in a statement.

He did not blame any specific group, but when he uses the phrase "enemies of Afghanistan," it is widely believed that he is referring to countries, including Pakistan, that he suspects are backing fighters in Afghanistan.

Until now, the decade-long Afghan war has largely been spared sectarian violence.

Both the Taliban and the United States have condemned the attacks.