News



Men in Kabul, Afghanistan, mourn inside a hospital compound after an attack Dec. 28. The Islamic State has claimed responsibility for the attack that has claimed more than 40 lives and wounded dozens more. (CNS/Mohammad Ismail, Reuters)

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Kabul, Afghanistan — December 28, 2017
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A brutal attack claimed by the Islamic State group devastated a two-story Shiite Muslim cultural center in the Afghan capital on Thursday, killing at least 41 people and wounding another 84, many suffering severe burns from the intensity of the explosions.

The ISIS-linked Aamaq news agency said three bombs were used in the ferocious assault as well as a single suicide bomber who blew himself up inside the center, where scores of people had gathered to mark the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the former Soviet Union.

The claim reflects eyewitness reports that said one bomber sneaked into the center and exploded his device. Other explosions occurred outside the building, which also houses the pro-Iranian Afghan Voice news agency, which may also have been a target in the attack.

Earlier, Interior Ministry spokesman Najib Danish said an unknown number of suicide attackers set off an explosion outside the center before carrying out an attack inside.

In its statement to Aamaq news agency, the IS said the center was being funded by Iran and used to propagate Shiite beliefs.

Ali Reza Ahmadi, a journalist with the Afghan Voice, told The Associated Press he had been in his office when the explosion shattered the building. He leapt from his second-story office to the roof of the building where he saw flames from the basement.

"I jumped from the roof toward the basement yelling at people to get water to put out the fire," he said.

Shiite leader Abdul Hussain Ramazandada said witnesses reported at least one suicide bomber sneaked into the event and was sitting among the participants. He exploded his device and as people fled more explosions occurred, he said.

At nearby Istiqlal Hospital, director Mohammed Sabir Nasib said the emergency room was overwhelmed with the dead and wounded. Additional doctors and nurses were called in to help and at the height of the tragedy more than 50 doctors and nurses were working to save the wounded, most of whom suffered severe burns.

The death toll rose as the day progressed. By late afternoon Wahid Mujro, spokesman for the public health ministry, said 41 were dead and 84 others were wounded.

The two-story cultural center is located in a poor area of the Shiite-dominated Dasht-e-Barchi neighborhood in the west of the capital. The center is a simple structure surrounded by sun-dried mud homes where some of Kabul's poorest live.

In an interview with The Associated Press, a senior member of the Shiite cleric council, Mohammad Asif Mesbah, said the center may have been targeted because it houses the deeply pro-Iranian Afghan Voice news agency. Its owner Sayed Eissa Hussaini Mazari is a strong proponent of Iran and his publication is dominated by Iranian news. Iran is a majority Shiite Muslim nation.

The local Islamic State affiliate has carried out several attacks targeting Shiites in Afghanistan. The IS issued a warning earlier this year following an attack on the Iraqi Embassy in Kabul vowing to target Afghanistan's Shiites. Since then, the IS has taken credit for at least two attacks on Shiite mosques in Kabul and one in the western city of Herat, killing scores of worshippers.

In a telephone interview with The AP, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid denied involvement in Thursday's attack on the cultural center.

The IS affiliate, made up of Sunni extremists, view Shiites as apostates. The IS in Afghanistan is a toxic mix of Uzbek militants belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan who broke with the Taliban, as well as disenchanted insurgents who left the much larger and more well-established Taliban.

'Crime against humanity'

As attacks targeting Shiites have increased in Kabul, residents of this area have grown increasingly afraid. Most schools have additional armed guards from among the local population. Still, Ramazandada said security at the cultural center was light.

Afghan president Ashraf Ghani called the attack a "crime against humanity."

In a statement released by the presidential palace, Ghani said: "The terrorist have killed our people. The terrorists have attacked our mosques, our holy places and now our cultural center." He called them attacks against Islam and "all human values."

In a statement, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, John R. Bass, called the attack "horrific" and said "we remain confident the Afghan government and people, supported by their friends and partners, will defeat those behind these terrible acts."

Separately, Dawlat Abad District Gov. Mohammad Karim said a powerful mine killed six shepherd children ranging in age from 8 to 10 on Wednesday.

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Afghanistan has the highest number of mine victims in the world, which along with other roadside bombs, kill or wound an estimated 140 people every month.

Elsewhere, a Taliban attack on a security police post in central Ghazni province Wednesday night left three police dead and one other wounded, said Mohammad Zaman, provincial chief of police.