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Al Jazeera

Shia shrines targeted in deadly Afghan blasts

At least 54 people killed in suicide blast at Kabul shrine as hundreds mark Ashoura, while four dead in northern city.

12/6/2011

Two bomb blasts apparently targeting Shia Muslim shrines as hundreds of people gathered to mark the day of Ashoura have killed at least 58 people and injured scores more, according to Afghan police and media reports.

At least 54 people were killed by a suicide bomber who detonated explosives at the gate of the Abu-UI Fazil shrine in the capital Kabul on Tuesday, many of them children, the AFP news agency reported.

Al Jazeera's Jennifer Glasse, reporting from the blast site in Kabul, said police had confirmed the death toll. The ministry of health said that more than 100 people had also been injured.

Ambulances rushed to the scene to take the wounded to hospital while some berated police for allowing the attack to occur on a major religious holiday, four correspondent said.

"I was there watching people mourning when there was suddenly a huge explosion," witness Ahmad Fawad said.

"Some people around me fell down injured. I wasn't hurt, so I got up and started running. It was horrible," he said.

Four people were also killed and four injured in a separate blast, caused by a bomb carried on a bicycle, near a mosque in the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif, a district police chief said.

The Taliban condemned bomb attacks in Kabul and the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif as the brutal work of "enemies", a spokesperson for the insurgent group said.

"Very sadly we heard that there were explosions in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif, where people were killed by the enemy's un-Islamic and inhuman activity," Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement published on their website.

Kabul has been targeted by a series of bold attacks in recent months, include assaults on the US embassy, a major hotel and the offices of the British Council.

The blasts occurred as Shias gathered to carry out religious rituals to mark one of the most significant days in their calendar.

Ashoura, a public holiday in Afghanistan, is the Shia day of mourning commemorating the martyrdom of Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Mohammed.

Shias were banned from marking Ashoura in public under the Taliban. This year, there are more Ashoura monuments around the city than in recent years, including black shrines and flags.

And a bomb placed in a motorcycle exploded in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar on Tuesday afternoon, injuring three civilians, a spokesman for the provincial governor said.

The blast came shortly after those in Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif killed at least 4. The site of the Kandahar blast was not near any mosque or shrine.

The attacks came shortly after a major conference on Afghanistan's future, held in the German city of Bonn, 10 years after talks there which put in place an interim government after US-led troops toppled the Taliban.

However, Pakistan and the Taliban - both seen as pivotal to any end to the bloody strife in Afghanistan - decided to stay away from the talks, undermining already modest hopes for real progress.