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Rare Attacks on Shiites Kill Scores in Afghanistan - Pakistan-based extremist group claimed responsibility

By Rod Nordland

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A Pakistan-based extremist group claimed responsibility for a series of coordinated attacks aimed at Afghan Shiites on Tuesday, in what many feared was an attempt to further destabilize Afghanistan by adding a new dimension of strife to a country that, though battered by a decade of war, has been free of sectarian conflict.



A wounded man and a boy try to stand up after a suicide blast targeting a Shi'ite Muslim gathering in Kabul December 6, 2011.
REUTERS/Najibullah Musafer

The attacks, among the war's deadliest, struck three Afghan cities — Kabul, Kandahar and Mazar-i-Sharif — almost simultaneously and killed at least 63 Shiite worshipers on Ashura, which marks the death of Shiite Islam's holiest martyr.

Targeted strikes by Sunnis against Shiites are alien to Afghanistan. So it was no surprise to Afghans when responsibility was claimed by a Sunni extremist group from Pakistan, where Sunnis and Shiites have been energetically killing one another for decades.

The group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, had not previously claimed or carried out attacks in Afghanistan, however, and its emergence fueled suspicions that Al Qaeda, the Taliban or Pakistan's spy agency — or some combination of the those three — had teamed up with the group to send the message that Afghanistan's future stability remained deeply tenuous and indeed dependent on the cooperation of outside forces.



A man carries a wounded boy after a suicide blast targeting a Shi'ite Muslim gathering in Kabul December 6, 2011. REUTERS/Najibullah Musesafer

“Never in our history have there been such cruel attacks on religious observances,” said President Hamid Karzai, in a statement released by his office. “The enemies of Afghanistan do not want us to live under one roof with peace and harmony.”

The timing of the attacks was especially pointed, coming a day after an international conference on Afghanistan in Bonn, Germany, that had been viewed as an opportunity for Afghanistan to cement long-term support from the West.

But the conference fell considerably short of the objectives that officials had envisioned because Taliban insurgents and Pakistani diplomats did not attend. Pakistan pulled out of the conference as a protest over the deaths of 24 of its soldiers in an American airstrike, launched from Afghan territory, which American officials have depicted as the result of a misunderstanding.

Critics of Pakistan were quick to read both Monday's boycott and Tuesday's bombings as a signal from the Pakistanis, delivered by Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, that Afghanistan could not ignore Pakistan.



A man carries a wounded boy after a suicide blast targeting a Shi'ite Muslim gathering in Kabul December 6, 2011. REUTERS/Najibullah Mosafer

“Pakistan is our historical enemy and wants us to never live in peace,” said Noor Mohammad, one of the wounded worshipers, who was covered in blood minutes. “What should we do, where should we go? The terrorists are not even letting us carry on our religious practices.”



A man carries a wounded boy after a suicide blast targeting a Shi'ite Muslim gathering in Kabul December 6, 2011. REUTERS/Najibullah Mosafer

Abdul Qayou Sajadi, a Hazara member of Parliament, made similar assumptions, though he did not mention Pakistan by name. “As you know, the peace efforts by our government and the international community are going on, but some of our neighboring countries failed in this

regard,” he said. “Now they are trying to divide our people along religious lines, and create another war among Afghans as they did in the past.”

While members of Afghanistan’s Shiite minority, mostly ethnic Hazaras, faced savage discrimination during the years of Taliban rule, they had not been singled out for attacks during the current insurgency.

The actual intentions of those behind Tuesday’s attacks remained murky, however, not least because of the tangled history of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, which once operated openly in Pakistan with the support of its spy service, the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI, but has since been outlawed. In recent years it has struck up alliances with Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban, an umbrella group of Pakistani militants that has attacked Pakistan’s cities and security services numerous times.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi is inspired by a fundamentalist Deobandi philosophy that justifies killing Shiites because of their beliefs, and it has on several occasions attacked Americans, Christians and other Muslim minorities as well. There is no record of previous operations by the group in Afghanistan, however, so no one seriously thought Lashkar-e-Jhangvi could carry out a coordinated series of bombings in three Afghan cities without substantial support from other sources.

Tuesday’s bombings aroused fears that extremists were trying to provoke a reaction like the one after the 2006 bombing of a Shiite shrine in Samarra, Iraq, which ignited two years of tit-for-tat sectarian violence. That attack was carried out by militants aligned with Al Qaeda, which also has an anti-Shiite philosophy.

Shiite religious and political leaders in Afghanistan were quick to call for calm, warning that a violent response was just what the killers were trying to provoke. “Our Hazara people should be cool-headed and not react because our enemies will take advantage of that to divide our country,” said a prominent Hazara leader and Shiite cleric, Mohammad Husain Mohaqiq.

The three bombings all took place around midday as Shiite devotees marched in processions to honor the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the holiest of specifically Shiite holidays.

In the southern city of Kandahar a bomb on a parked motorcycle exploded and narrowly missed an Ashura procession, wounding two police officers and three passersby, said Abdul Razaq, a police chief.

In the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, a suicide bomber, apparently traveling on foot, killed four worshipers and wounded more than 20, said Sirjan Durani, a police spokesman.

The deadliest attack occurred in Kabul’s crowded Murad Khani neighborhood, when a suicide bomber infiltrated a procession in front of the Abul Fazal Abbas Shrine. The powerful blast killed scores of worshipers and damaged the mosque. Many people, terrified of a follow-up attack, jumped into the nearby Kabul River, which is choked with sewage.

In the processional, men had been beating their bared chests to show their sorrow at Imam Hussein's martyrdom; some also whipped their backs with barbed chains.

"The explosion took place inside the crowd," said a wounded man, Said Zaki, 18, whose face and clothes were covered in blood. "We didn't see who the bomber was, but he was definitely on foot. We saw 30 or 40 people on the ground missing arms and legs."

Throughout the day, the official count of the dead climbed as more and more of the nearly 200 wounded people died of horrific injuries. In one hospital, five infants were among 14 victims declared dead on arrival. Every hospital in Kabul, the capital, took in victims.

At the Emergency Hospital, when corridors filled up with the wounded, doctors put the overflow patients in a laundry room and the dead on stretchers in the courtyard. Outside, angry and sometimes hysterical relatives tried to climb over the hospital walls, then forced their way in when doors were opened to bring in blood donors for urgently needed transfusions.

Kabul's police chief, Gen. Mohammad Ayoub Salangi, was aware of the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi claim, which was reported by the BBC and Radio Free Europe quoting the group's spokesman, Qari Abubakar. But he said none of the Pakistan-based extremists could carry out operations without Taliban support. "All the militant groups have very good cooperation with the Taliban in Afghanistan, so I am sure they were aware of it," he said.

An e-mail sent to news organizations from the spokesman for the Taliban, Zabiullah Mujahid, denied responsibility. "We strongly condemn this wild and inhuman act by our enemies, who are trying to blame us and trying to divide Afghans by doing such attacks on Muslims," the message said.