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Suicide Bomber Kills 20 in Afghan Mosque

By N.C. Aizenman
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KABUL, Afghanistan, June 1 -- A suicide bomber disguised as an Afghan soldier attacked a crowded mosque in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar on Wednesday morning, setting off a massive explosion that killed 19 people and injured more than 50, Afghan officials said.

The blast occurred during a memorial service for a prominent and outspoken pro-government cleric who had been assassinated three days earlier. The police chief of the capital, Kabul, Gen. Akram Khakrezwal, was among those killed in the blast, which left the mosque littered with body parts and pools of blood, according to witnesses quoted in news service reports.

Many local leaders had been expected to attend the ceremony in honor of the cleric, Abdul Fayaz.

An Interior Ministry spokesman, Lutfullah Mashal, blamed insurgents linked to al Qaeda or the former Taliban government ousted by U.S.-led forces in 2001. According to Mashal, the bomber's facial features and documents found on his body indicated he was an Arab, not an Afghan.

"This was done by extremists and fundamentalists who have lost the frontline war with security forces and now are targeting soft, civilian targets," Mashal said. "They want to intimidate people and derail the process leading to parliamentary elections" scheduled for September.

The attack came as many residents of the city were still reeling from the slaying of Fayaz, leader of the Council of Clerics in Kandahar and a longtime supporter of President Hamid Karzai. About two weeks ago, Fayaz had convened hundreds of religious leaders from across Afghanistan to issue a religious edict against following the orders of the fugitive Taliban leader Mohammad Omar, and to formally strip Omar of a religious title -- "leader of the faithful" -- that local clerics had granted him when he assumed power in the early 1990s.

The move was particularly significant in Kandahar, which is both the spiritual birthplace of the Taliban movement and a base from which Karzai has drawn much support.

On Sunday, unknown assailants gunned down Fayaz near his office in Kandahar. Abdul Latif Hakimi, who frequently purports to be a spokesman for the Taliban, asserted responsibility for that attack on behalf of the movement in calls to news services. He has denied that the Taliban was involved in Wednesday's bombing, according to reports.

The blast occurred about 9 a.m. in an area of the mosque where hundreds of mourners were removing their shoes before entering the prayer area. The bomber, dressed in camouflage pants and shirt, was seen approaching the Kabul police chief just before blowing himself up, Mashal said.

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last month, U.S.-led forces and units of the Afghan army have mounted a concerted effort to root out training elements of the Taliban -- killing about 200 insurgents in battles that have often been

campaign, however, has been accompanied by a marked upswing in violent attacks against military and civilian targets in Afghanistan, with weekly and sometimes daily ambushes and roadside explosions.

The most recent of these occurred just hours after the mosque attack when a bomb exploded on a bridge in Kandahar as members of an Afghan team clearing mines drove across. Two people were killed in the explosion and five others were wounded, according to wire reports.

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