

23 dead in Lebanon suicide bombings, Al-Qaeda affiliate claims responsibility

Associated Press : Beirut (Lebanon)

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Two suicide bombings struck Tuesday near the Iranian Embassy in the Lebanese capital of Beirut, killing 23 people, including the Iranian cultural attaché.

The mid-morning blasts hit Beirut's upscale neighborhood of Janah, a stronghold of the Iranian-backed Shiite Muslim Hezbollah group. One explosion blew out the large black main gate of the Iranian mission, damaging the three-story facility.

The Abdullah Azzam brigades, a Lebanon-based al Qaeda affiliate, said it was behind a double suicide attack on the Iranian embassy in Beirut on Tuesday, according to the Twitter page of a cleric linked to the group.

"The Abdullah Azzam brigades - the Hussein bin Ali cells - may they please God - are behind the attack on the Iranian embassy in Beirut," Sheikh Sirajeddine Zuraiqat, the group's religious guide, posted on Twitter.

The brigades threatened more attacks in Lebanon until Iran pulled its forces out of Syria and their prisoners were released from Lebanese jails, the post added.

Iran-backed Shi'ite Hezbollah militants have been fighting alongside Syrian government forces against rebels in Syria.

Iranian Ambassador Ghazanfar Roknabadi identified the dead diplomat as Sheikh Ibrahim Ansari. Speaking to Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV, he said Ansari took his post in Lebanon a month ago and was overseeing all regional cultural activities.

Lebanese Health Minister Ali Hassan Khalil said 23 people were killed and 146 wounded in the blasts.

Debris was scattered on the street and cars were on fire as people ran away from the chaotic scene. The second blast was meters (yards) away from the embassy building.

AP video showed firefighters extinguishing flames from vehicles, blood-spattered streets and bodies covered with sheets on the ground. A charred motorcycle stood outside the embassy gate.

An armed guard at the embassy told AP that the first blast was believed to have been carried out by a suicide attacker who rode a motorcycle and blew himself up outside the gate. The guard, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to media, said the other explosion, which caused much more damage, was likely a car bomb.