

CAR BOMB AT PAKISTANI REFUGEE CAMP KILLS 13

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

PESHAWAR, Pakistan (AP) -- A car packed with explosives blew up inside a refugee camp in northwestern Pakistan on Thursday as hundreds of people lined up to get food, killing 13 and wounding 25, officials said.

The attack on the Jalojai camp underlines the intensity of the conflict in Pakistan's northwest, where refugees are sometimes caught in the middle of a battle between the government and militants. Militants often don't want residents to flee an area of conflict, in part because it deprives them of a civilian population in which to hide and undermines their claim that they have local support.

The people living in Jalojai camp, which lies on the outskirts of the main northwest city of Peshawar, are Pakistanis who have been displaced by fighting between the army and the Taliban in the country's northwest.

Peshawar is located on the border of the tribal region, the Taliban's main sanctuary in the country, and has been hit with scores of bombings in recent years. The Taliban have been waging a bloody insurgency against the government in an attempt to establish an Islamic state and end Pakistan's cooperation with the United States in fighting militancy.

Most of the people hit by the attack were from the Bajur and Khyber tribal areas along the Afghan border, said police officer Mohammad Zahid. The army has carried out operations against the Pakistani Taliban in both those areas.

An official with one of the aid groups was working in an office about 30 meters (yards) from where the vehicle exploded.

"It was very terrible, very terrible. We were very near. It was very loud," said Mumtaz Bangash. "I have seen so many injured people."

Among the dead were a security guard and an employee of a Pakistani aid group who were walking by when the bomb exploded, said Faiz Muhammed, who runs Khyber Paktunkhwa province's programs to help displaced people. The rest of the 13 killed were camp residents.

Many of the refugees get rations from the United Nations' World Food Program, which feeds nearly 1 million people a month at Jalojai and other distribution points across the northwest.

Jean-Luc Siblot, the program's country director for Pakistan, said the organization would temporarily suspend its operations while discussions continue with the government on how to secure the food distribution centers. But he said there was "no question" that the World Food Program would resume operations soon.

Muhammed said he and his staff would continue helping people at the camp despite the blast and called on aid groups to step up with even more help in the future.

"We need to show these people that we will not be deterred," he said. "For the life of me I cannot understand who would try to sabotage these people who are already affected by a war."

Jalojai, about 30 kilometers (19 miles) southwest of Peshawar, is one of three camps in Pakistan

for people displaced by the fighting in the northwest.

It's run by the Pakistani government with assistance from various international aid agencies and is essentially a small city, with about 57,000 refugees living there.

The population ebbs and flows depending on the ongoing military operations in the tribal areas. In recent days, refugees from intense fighting in the remote Tirah Valley showed up at the camp looking for help, said Muhammed.

Jalozai has schools, a hospital and job training programs designed to help people prepare for their eventual return home. Representatives from the various aid groups constantly travel back and forth to the camp, and foreign delegations often visit.

An attack like Thursday's is extremely rare, although there have been concerns over the years that militants would try to infiltrate Jalozai and other camps like it. Also, attacks against the refugees can be a way to punish them for fleeing in the first place and for accepting government and international help.

The Taliban in Pakistan withdrew an offer of holding peace talks with the Pakistani government this week, saying officials did not seem serious about sitting down at the negotiation table despite comments to the contrary.

Pakistan is preparing for a historic election on May 11 that will mark the first time an elected civilian government has survived a full term and handed over power to another civilian government. But the ruling Pakistan People's Party has watched its popularity erode in the past five years because of rising inflation, electricity blackouts and militant attacks.

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