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Pakistan Holds 19 Suspects in Mosque Raid

By REUTERS

QUETTA, Pakistan, July 6 (Reuters) — Pakistan has detained 19 suspects in connection with the attack on Friday on a Shiite Muslim mosque in Quetta that killed at least 53 people, the police said today.

Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali said "foreign hands" were suspected in the suicide attack, apparently a reference either to the Taliban and Al Qaeda in neighboring Afghanistan or to Indian intelligence agencies.

"Right now all the clues we have are leading us toward involvement of foreign hands," Mr. Jamali told state-run television.

"In two to four days we will have reports and then we will be in a better position to say who is involved," Mr. Jamali said.

Officials said security had been tightened in Quetta, a southwestern city near the Afghan border, and army troops had been stationed around Shiite mosques. Paramilitary patrols in Shiite neighborhoods have also been increased.

A senior official said the government of Baluchistan Province, where Quetta is the capital, had decided to crack down on sectarian groups.

Humayun Jomezai, deputy police chief of the province, said the police had rounded up members of outlawed radical Sunni Muslim groups in overnight raids.

A nighttime curfew is still in place in Quetta, as tensions between Shiites and the majority Sunni Muslims remain high. Shiites represent 15 to 20 percent of Pakistan's Muslim population.

"The detained people are now part of our investigations, but we are looking into all other aspects, including involvement of foreign hands," Mr. Jomezai said.

He said investigators were analyzing material found on the bodies of the three attackers and trying to ascertain their nationalities.

"Their bodies are with us and nobody has yet claimed them," he said. "Their identification will help us in the investigation."

The three men had wheeled a trolley up to the gate of the mosque during prayers before pulling guns from under a cover and opening fire on worshipers, the police said.

All three attackers had grenades strapped to their waists, and two of them detonated the explosives. A third, who did not, died later of wounds possibly sustained when guards opened fire.

The grenade and gun attack, the worst in Pakistan in years and the first case of a sectarian suicide bombing, also wounded more than 60 people. No group has claimed responsibility.

Angry Shiites took to the streets on Friday, burning vehicles, shops and a wing of a hospital, and later killing a Sunni seminary teacher.

Hundreds of people have been killed in sectarian violence involving Sunni and Shiite militants in recent years. The level of attacks has become worse this year after a lull in 2002.