

## **YEMEN SUICIDE BOMB MASSACRE 'BEGINNING OF JIHAD,' SAYS AL QAEDA**

**By Ahmed Al-Haj**

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A suicide bomber blew himself up at a military parade rehearsal Monday in Yemen's capital, killing 96 soldiers in one of the deadliest attacks in the city in years, officials said. Al Qaeda's Yemen branch claimed responsibility for the attack.

The group said in an emailed statement that it had targeted the defence minister, Maj. Gen. Mohammed Nasser Ahmed, who arrived at the heavily secured city square to greet the assembled troops just minutes before the blast ripped through the area.

The bombing left a scene of carnage, with scores of bleeding soldiers lying on the ground as ambulances rushed to the scene. Several severed heads were on the pavement amid large pools of blood and human remains.

"This is a real massacre," said Ahmed Sobhi, one of the soldiers who witnessed the explosion. "There are piles of torn body parts, limbs and heads. This is unbelievable. I am still shaking. The place turned into hell. I thought this only happens in movies."

The drill was a rehearsal for a parade for the celebration of Yemen's National Day on Tuesday.

Soldiers hand-picked by their commanders from different branches of the military had been practising together for the parade for a week, Sobhi said, citing that as evidence that the attacker was a soldier and not an infiltrator.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula vowed, "This is only the beginning of Jihad," and said that its militants will continue staging attacks against the Yemeni leadership. It said the bombing was meant to take revenge for the government's military offensive in a swath of southern Yemen seized by the militant movement last year.

A statement in the name of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi read on state TV said: "The war on terrorism will continue until we win, whatever the sacrifices are."

Military officials said the suicide bomber in Sanaa was a soldier taking part in the drill, lining up with fellow troops at a main square in the capital, not far from the presidential palace.

He belonged to the Central Security, a paramilitary force commanded by the nephew of ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yahia, the officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

Officials said the bomber detonated his explosives minutes before the arrival of the defence minister and the chief of staff, who were expected to greet the troops.

Another soldier told The Associated Press over the phone from the site of the attack that the explosion was followed by heavy gunfire.

"In the mayhem, we were all running in all directions," said Khaled Ali. "I saw the guards of the minister surrounding him and forming a human cordon. They were firing in the air."

The site of the attack had been sealed off by Republican Guard forces for the past 24 hours in preparation for the National Day celebrations. No cars or pedestrians were allowed to enter. The Republican Guard is led by Saleh's son and one-time heir apparent, Ahmed.

Shortly after the attack, Hadi demoted two of Saleh's relatives from their top positions in the Central Security forces and the interior ministry: a new commander, Fadl al-Qousi, was appointed as the top commander of Central Security forces, senior to nephew Yahia; and in-law Mohammed al-Qousi lost his post as the commander of a police force.

Saleh stepped down in February as part of a U.S.-backed, power-transfer deal brokered by Gulf Arab countries aimed at ending political unrest in the country. It gave Saleh immunity from prosecution in return for relinquishing his power.

Since then, Hadi has pledged to restructure the army and purge it from Saleh's family members and loyalists suspected of hindering reforms.

"We are speeding up the restructuring of the army to bring back stability to the country which was on a brink of all-out war," the president's statement said. "Yemen can't bear more crises."

Hadi has also vowed to step up the fight against Al Qaeda, which expanded its foothold after exploiting the political and security turmoil in the wake of the uprising against Saleh.

Since the revolt erupted, inspired by other Arab Spring uprisings, Al Qaeda militants overran large swaths of territory and several towns and cities in the south, pushing out government forces and establishing their own rule.

In recent weeks, the army has launched a concerted effort to uproot the militants from their strongholds — and is closely co-ordinating with a small contingent of U.S. troops who are helping guide the operations from inside Yemen.

Monday's bombing is one of the deadliest attacks in Sanaa, the capital.

Last June, an attack targeting Saleh's compound left 11 bodyguards dead, and seriously injured Saleh and five senior officials worshipping alongside him. In 2008, an attack on the U.S. embassy in Sanaa left 19 Yemeni soldiers dead.

Yemen, the ancestral homeland of Osama bin Laden, was the site of the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole, which killed 17 American sailors. There have also been a spate of assaults on the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa, including a 2008 bombing that killed 10 Yemeni guards and four civilians.

In the wake of a separate attack on Sunday, the Pentagon confirmed that three civilian contractors helping train Yemen's coast guard were shot at Sunday in Yemen. Cmdr. Bill Speaks, a defence department spokesman, said Monday that injuries to the party were minor. The three were travelling in a car in the Red Sea port city of Hodeida on Sunday, when militants in another vehicle shot at them.