

Suicide attacks on school and protest march kill 12

Militant Sunni Islamist group claim responsibility, saying they were revenge for killings in the country's north

The Guardian, Friday 25 May 2012



Yemeni women protest against the suicide bombings that killed at least 12 people. The attack was claimed by militant Sunnis. Photograph: Yahya Arhab/EPA

Two suicide bombers linked to al-Qaida blew themselves up at a school and a protest march in northern Yemen on Friday killing at least 12 people, the defence ministry said. The attacks, targeting Shia Muslims, came less than a week after a suicide bomber in army uniform detonated an explosive belt at a military parade rehearsal in Sana'a, killing more than 90 soldiers and wounding 200 more.

The United States and its Gulf Arab allies have watched with mounting alarm as al-Qaida-affiliated militants, emboldened by political instability in Yemen, have launched a series of audacious attacks in the impoverished state.

A militant Sunni Islamist group affiliated to al-Qaida said it had carried out the attacks in revenge for the killing of Sunni Muslims in Yemen's north, a Shia rebel stronghold bordering Saudi Arabia.

Sunni Muslim militants affiliated with al-Qaida view Shi'ite Muslims as heretics. One attack occurred in the northern al-Jawf province, where a suicide bomber drove into a school in which members of a Shi'ite rebel group, also known as Houthis, had gathered to pray, killing 12 people, a local official said.

An offshoot of Ansar al-Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law), itself an affiliate of al-Qaida's Yemen-based wing, said more than 20 Houthi "apostates" had been killed, in a statement claiming responsibility for the attack.

Earlier on Friday, another suicide bomber targeted a Houthi protest march in the rugged northern province of Saada, where the rebels have effectively carved out their own state within a state. There were no casualties in the attack, the Houthis said in a statement.

"As the march was taking its first steps, the suicide bomber, who was wearing an explosive belt, tried to breach the security barriers and enter the square," read a statement from the Houthis' media office.

"But those responsible for protecting the protest stopped and searched him, which made him nervous and he lost control, blowing himself up erroneously."

The group put the death toll at more than 20.

Washington is trying to counter the threat of Islamist militants by deepening its involvement in Yemen, using drone strikes to target suspected militants and training the Yemeni army to fight them.

Islamist militants in Yemen have so far focused on attacking troops sent to fight them in the south of the country, where they control several towns in the southern Abyan province, but the group warned the Houthis they were also targets.

"O apostates, don't think that we have forgotten you or that our battle against the crusaders and their allies in Abyan will stop us from fighting you. For, by God, we will not cease until we purify the Arabian peninsula of you," it said.

The Houthis have fought regularly with Sunni Muslim Salafis attending a religious college in Saada. They accuse Riyadh of smuggling weapons to the Salafis because the two follow a similar creed.

Saudi Arabia briefly fought the Houthis in north Yemen after they grabbed Saudi territory in 2009.

The US envoy to Yemen said in February there were signs that Shi'ite Iran was becoming more active in Yemen and could pose a deeper threat to its stability and security. Iran denies interfering in the country.

© 2012 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.