

Bomb hits outside suspected Pakistani nuclear-weapons site

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By Saeed Shah | McClatchy Newspapers

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — A suicide bomber attacked a suspected nuclear-weapons site Friday in Pakistan, raising fears about the security of the nuclear arsenal, while two other terrorist blasts made it another bloody day in the country's struggle against extremism.

Increasingly daring and sophisticated attacks by terrorists allied with al Qaida on some of Pakistan's most sensitive and best-protected installations have led to warnings that extremists could damage a nuclear facility or seize nuclear material.

Pakistan's nuclear sites are mostly in the northwest of the country, close to the capital, Islamabad, to keep them away from the border with archenemy India, but that places them close to Pakistani Taliban extremists, who are massed in the northwest. Al Qaida has made clear its ambitions to get hold of a nuclear bomb or knowledge of nuclear technology. Several other sites associated with Pakistan's nuclear weapons have been hit previously.

Pakistan is reeling from a wave of terrorist violence that's coincided with the launch of a U.S.-backed ground operation by the military against the country's al Qaida and Taliban heartland of South Waziristan, on the Afghan border.

A suicide attacker struck a checkpoint Friday morning on the boundary of the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex, an air force base at Kamra, about 40 miles outside Islamabad, killing eight people, including two security personnel, and wounding 15.

"There were strict security arrangements, so he (the bomber) was intercepted at the first checkpoint," local Police Chief Fakhar Sultan said.

Many of the attacks have been carried out in a deadly collaboration between Taliban extremists from the northwest and militants from Punjab, the country's most heavily populated province.

The military is a favorite target. Earlier this month, a team of commando-style assailants shot its way into the military headquarters at Rawalpindi. This week, gunmen ambushed and killed a brigadier general in Islamabad, spraying his army jeep with bullets.

Separately on Friday, a car bomb ripped through a hotel in an upscale residential neighborhood of Peshawar, the capital of the North West Frontier Province, wounding more than a dozen people, while a blast also struck a bus that was carrying a wedding party in the Mohmand tribal region, close to the Afghan border. Four women and three children were among the 17 people who were killed.

"Look what's happening in Islamabad. This (violence) can take place anywhere now," said Iftikhar Hussain, the provincial information minister for the North West Frontier Province. "We will not bow to terrorists ... whatever sacrifices we have to make."

At Kamra, the bomber rode up to the checkpoint on a bicycle, explosives strapped to his body. Officials denied that the facility, the major research center for the air force, had links to the nuclear program. However, Pakistan doesn't specify which sites are involved in the program and many independent experts think that Kamra is a nuclear air base.

The Kamra facility had been struck by a suicide bomber previously, in December 2007. In November 2007, the nuclear-missile storage site at Sargodha was attacked, while in August 2008, a team of suicide bombers blew themselves up at the entrance to the Wah armament factory, which is thought to be one of Pakistan's main nuclear-weapons assembly locations.

Pakistan's nuclear sites are tightly guarded, and the country repeatedly has denied any threat to them. While experts don't think that terrorists could seize a nuclear bomb -- the weapons aren't kept in a usable form -- it's possible that they could cause a fire or explosion at a nuclear site or perhaps seize radioactive material.

After the attack on the military headquarters earlier this month, Shaun Gregory, a professor at Britain's Bradford University and an expert on Pakistan's nuclear weapons, told McClatchy: "It is an incredible shock that terrorists can strike at the heart of GHQ (general headquarters). ... Terrorists could mount this sort of assault against Pakistan's nuclear installations."

After the military headquarters strike, Western officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, were forced to calm concerns, saying that "We have confidence in the Pakistani government and military's control over nuclear weapons." (*Shah is a McClatchy special correspondent.*)

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