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Last Updated: Wednesday, 3 March, 2004, 10:06 GMT

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Pakistan probes assault on Shias
Authorities in Pakistan have ordered an inquiry into an attack on Shia Muslims which left at least 43 people dead as they marked the holy day of Ashura.



A curfew is in place in the city of Quetta where the attack took place, with soldiers patrolling its streets.

Separately, 13 Shia women and children died in a stampede in north-western Pakistan late on Tuesday.

Pakistan has a history of clashes between radical groups among its Shia minority and majority Sunnis.

Angry Shias responded to the killings with arson attacks

Interior Minister Faisal Saleh Hayat condemned the Quetta attack.

"These misguided extremists want to create chaos in the country," he said on Wednesday.

"The government is aware of their designs and determined to continue its fight against extremism and sectarianism."

Mass funeral

The authorities in Quetta said one person injured in the violence had been arrested on suspicion of involvement in the attack.

The man had been beaten by a mob and handed over to police.

The Associated Press news agency reported that there were two other attackers, both of whom died.



Homes, businesses and a mosque used by Sunni Muslims were torched by rioters following the killings.

Security had been tight on Tuesday for Ashura, following a similar attack on a Shia religious gathering in Quetta last year that left 50 people dead.

Tuesday's attack coincided with devastating explosions in the Iraqi cities of Baghdad and Karbala that left nearly 200 dead - these too targeted Shias who had been celebrating Ashura, the anniversary of the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson.

The BBC Islamabad correspondent says it is unlikely the two events were linked.

Quetta's mayor said the inquiry there would investigate whether the attack was the work of a local extremist group or if foreign elements were involved.

No group has said it carried out the attack.

The city's chief Shia cleric, Allama Mahdi Najfi, said a mass funeral was being prepared on Wednesday at the main mosque.

However, he said it would not take place until 25 Shia youths allegedly held by police for damaging public property were freed.

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Automatic gunfire created chaos in the procession

“ I was present near the procession when we first heard an explosion and then some people fired shots ”

Quetta Mayor Abdul Rahim Kakar

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Mob rampage

Eyewitnesses to Tuesday's attack said that as the procession was passing through the city's shopping district, a grenade was thrown, followed by firing from automatic guns.

Police at the scene say they were unable to tell whether the shots were being fired on the procession or by Shias in self-defence.

At least five policemen are among those reported dead.

Afterwards groups of angry Shias attacked shops, vehicles and government property before security forces fired shots and tear gas to disperse them.

Late into Tuesday night, firefighters tackled blazes set by rioters. About 60 shops, a cinema and a bank were burned.

The exact number of dead remains unclear - some estimates put casualty figures higher, and doctors say they expect the death toll to rise.

At least 100 people are in hospital receiving treatment.

Short circuit

The stampede that left 13 people dead took place in the town of Parachinar, 250km (155 miles) west of the capital, Islamabad.

Local officials said a short circuit plunged a mosque into darkness, sparking panic.

"Dozens of women and children crammed on a staircase which collapsed under the pressure," said Parachinar official Azam Khan.

Another two people died in a shooting incident during a Shia procession in Punjab province, while 40 more were injured following clashes between Shias and Sunnis in the town of Phalia, 600km north-east of Quetta.

Last July, Quetta was the scene of one of the worst outbreaks of sectarian violence in Pakistan, when attackers armed with machine guns and grenades stormed a Shia mosque, killing 50 people who were praying inside.

About 97% of Pakistan's population is Muslim, and Sunnis outnumber Shias by about four-to-one.

SHIA FESTIVAL: ASHURA

Annual Shia festival commemorating martyrdom of Imam Hussein

Hussein, grandson of Prophet Mohammad, killed at Karbala by army of Caliph Yazid in 680

Faithful strike themselves with chains and swords to atone for Hussein martyrdom

The murder 19 years earlier of Ali, Hussein's father, gave rise to the central schism in Islam between Sunni and Shia

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