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Hundreds of people have died in the sectarian violence

Unidentified gunmen have shot dead two Shia Muslim leaders in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi.

Witnesses say Nazeer Abbas and Muzaffar Ali were killed by attackers armed with automatic weapons, as the two men sat outside an apartment complex.

The victims were members of Pakistan's principal Shia organisation, Tehrik-i-Jafria.

It is not clear who was behind the murders.

But they appear to be the latest in a series of attacks involving rival members of militant Sunni and Shia Muslim groups, in which hundreds have died.

"It is an act of terrorism related to sectarian killings," the AFP news agency quoted a local official, Iqbal Hussain Durrani, as saying.

Arrests

Tehrik activists took to the streets after the attack, setting a car on fire, blocking roads and hurling stones at passing vehicles.

Police and special paramilitary units have been deployed in Karachi, especially around Shia and Sunni seminaries, to prevent any outbreak of violence between the two communities.

Reports say 15 Shia activists have been arrested, including

“ It is an act of terrorism related to sectarian killings ”

Local official Hussain Durrani

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Tehrik-i-Jafria leader Hasan Turabi, in an attempt to prevent a violent backlash.

Police said they would be detained until after the funerals of the victims.

Last week, five Sunni Muslim scholars were killed in Karachi when the van in which they were travelling was ambushed by gunmen.

That attack led to widespread rioting in Karachi with Sunni leaders blaming the attack on the Tehrik-i-Jafria, a charge that was denied.

Clashes between Shia and Sunni groups in the North West Frontier Province left nine people dead last month.

Most of Pakistan's 140 million people are Sunni Muslims with Shias making up about 20% of the population.

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