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Bomber Kills 48 in Mosque in Pakistan

By [DAVID ROHDE](#)

ISLAMABAD, [Pakistan](#) — A suicide attacker detonated a powerful bomb inside a crowded mosque in northwestern Pakistan on Friday, killing 48 people and wounding 100 as they celebrated one of Islam's major holidays with the country's former interior minister, state-run media reported.

The bombing was the second assassination attempt in eight months on the official, Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao, who was the country's top law enforcement official until last month and who is running for Parliament in elections planned for January.

He was unhurt, but his son and two grandnephews were among the wounded. The local police estimated that hundreds of people had been inside the mosque, a modest white building constructed by the former minister's family in his ancestral village, Sherpao.

In a telephone interview, Mr. Sherpao said he believed that Islamic militants linked to [Al Qaeda](#) were responsible. He said that the bomb exploded as he and his relatives prayed in the front row of worshipers.

"It was a massacre," Mr. Sherpao said, his voice shaking with anger. "I can tell you that."

After the bombing, police and intelligence agents raided an Islamic school in the nearby village of Turangzai and arrested seven students, some of them Afghans, The Associated Press reported, citing two police officials who spoke on the condition of

anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly. The police officials declined to say whether the raid was connected to the suicide bombing.

The blast was the latest in a series of attacks that suggests that a state of emergency declared by President [Pervez Musharraf](#) last month has largely failed to halt terrorist attacks. From Nov. 3 to Dec. 15, Mr. Musharraf suspended the Constitution and ruled by decree in what he said was an effort to curb terrorism.

Mr. Musharraf's opponents said he used his emergency powers to suppress his political opponents and remove the country's Supreme Court before it could rule him ineligible for a third term in office.

Mr. Musharraf has cited an ongoing offensive by 20,000 Pakistani soldiers in the Swat Valley, a famed tourist area in northwestern Pakistan, as a sign of progress. Military officials say they have routed militants who have seized control of the area, killing 300 and driving the remainder into surrounding hills.

But suicide bombings have continued in northwestern Pakistan, possibly in response to the offensive. On Dec. 9, a suicide bombing in the Swat Valley killed six civilians and a police officer. On Dec. 10, a suicide bomb attack on a military truck carrying schoolchildren outside a Pakistani Air Force base in Kamra wounded five children and two adults.

On Dec. 15, a suicide bomber riding a bicycle killed two soldiers and three civilians outside an army camp in Nowshera. On Dec. 18, 12 soldiers were killed when a suicide bomber detonated explosives near a sports field used by the Pakistani Army in Kohat.

The mosque attack, with its high toll and its timing on a major holiday, represented a stepping-up of the violence. The holiday, Id al-Adha, the Islamic Feast of Sacrifice, marks the end of the annual hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, and celebrates the willingness of Ibrahim, or Abraham, to sacrifice his son when ordered to do so by God. Islam honors Abraham, like Jesus and many other biblical figures, as prophets.

Throughout Friday, Pakistani television stations showed images of blood-spattered prayer caps and clothes scattered across a white marble courtyard outside the mosque. Trails of blood marked where the wounded had been dragged from the building. Dozens of shoes lay abandoned.

“The blast occurred as we were prostrating during prayers,” an unidentified victim said in a television interview. “I was in the fourth row and then I saw bodies all over the place.”

After the bombing, local men frantically dug graves in an effort to bury the dead before sunset, in keeping with Muslim tradition.

Standing before a long line of coffins in a local graveyard, tall, bearded men wept. Thirty-eight people were buried in the village, Reuters reported, and some body parts were buried separately in a collective grave.

In April, a suicide bomber killed 28 people in an attack on Mr. Sherpao’s political party in Charsadda, a nearby town. Mr. Sherpao was slightly wounded in that attack.

Mr. Sherpao, like all other ministers in Mr. Musharraf’s government, resigned last month to allow a caretaker government to oversee the elections, to be held Jan. 8. The practice is common in parliamentary democracies.

Pakistan has suffered an unprecedented number of suicide attacks this year by militants with ties to the [Taliban](#) and Al Qaeda. The attacks have killed hundreds of Pakistani civilians this year.

This year's deadliest suicide bombing occurred in October during a procession in Karachi celebrating the return of former Prime Minister [Benazir Bhutto](#) to Pakistan. The attack, which is believed to have involved two suicide bombers, killed about 140 people and wounded 500, most of them volunteers in Ms. Bhutto's party. Ms. Bhutto was not hurt in the attack.

Many of the suicide bombers are believed to have been trained in the country's lawless tribal areas, where 100,000 Pakistani troops have been deployed to drive out Taliban and foreign militants.

Backed by members of Al Qaeda, Taliban militants based in the tribal areas have carried out a record number of suicide bombings in Pakistan and Afghanistan this year. The Qaeda leader, [Osama bin Laden](#), is also believed to be hiding in the region.