

International

Truck bomb in eastern Afghan city kills five, 14 injured

Taliban say ready to fight attacking Afghan forces

JALALABAD/KABUL: A truck packed with explosives blew up near a court in the eastern Afghan city of Gardez yesterday, killing at least five people, two days after gunmen attacked a maternity ward in the capital Kabul, killing women and newborn babies.

"A car bomb explosion took place near a military court in Gardez city, which is a populated area. Dozens of civilians are feared to be dead and wounded," said Tariq Arian, an interior ministry spokesman.

Emal Khan Momand, a military spokesman in Paktia province where Gardez is located, said the attack was carried out by a truck packed with explosives. Five people were killed and 14 were wounded, he said. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the blast. Arian blamed the militant Haqqani network, which has ties to Taliban rebels and the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba militant group. These groups rarely publicly claim responsibility for attacks.

The blast comes after a violent week in which gunmen attacked a maternity hospital in Kabul, killing 24 people, including new mothers and newborn babies, on Tuesday. A suicide blast claimed by the Islamic State at a funeral in eastern Nangahar on the same day killed 32.

President Ashraf Ghani condemned the attacks and said he had ordered the military to switch to offensive mode rather than the defensive stance it

had adopted as the United States withdraws troops and tries to broker talks with the Taliban.

The Taliban has denied any involvement in the attacks, but the government has accused the group of fostering an environment in which terrorism thrives or working with other militant groups who could have been involved, straining efforts by the United States to bring the insurgents and the Afghan government together.

The Taliban on Wednesday said they were prepared to battle Afghan forces after the president told troops to resume offensive operations following grisly attacks that have further unravelled a fragile peace process.

New details have emerged on Tuesday's assault on a Kabul maternity hospital, where at least 24 people including infants, mothers and nurses were killed. The daylight attack was followed by a blast at a funeral in the country's east that killed 32 mourners.

According to international humanitarian organisation Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), or Doctors Without Borders, which runs the maternity wing at the Barchi Hospital in west Kabul, one woman gave birth during the lengthy attack.

"While pregnant women and babies were seeking health care in one of the most vulnerable states in life ... attackers stormed the maternity (unit) through a series of explosions and gunfire lasting for hours," MSF said in a statement.

since 1993, for which the country was largely unprepared. Farmers now have little confidence the government will help them fight a new wave of voracious insects threatening their harvests – though officials said extensive measures were being taken.

"Neither the central, nor the provincial government is doing anything about it," said Bhurgri, who grows vegetables, red chillies, cotton and sugarcane on about 600 acres of land.

'PERFECT SETTING'

The locusts arrived in Pakistan from Iran in June 2019, devouring cotton, wheat and maize, among other crops.

The invasion was initially expected to subside by mid-November. But it has persisted due to favourable weather conditions for continued locust breeding, linked to global warming, according to FAO's Pakistan office.

"Good vegetation due to plentiful rain and a sandy soil provided a perfect setting for the insects to multiply," said Muhammad Tariq Khan, technical director at the Department of Plant Protection in the Ministry of National Food Security and Research.

In a recent letter to Prime Minister Imran Khan, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah warned of a "massive locust attack" expected on local farmland when swarms from Iran reach his province in mid-May, which could "prove more harmful" than last year's invasion.

With little time to waste, farmer Bhurgri decided to take matters into his own hands and "fight the locusts myself".

Using a power sprayer fixed on a tractor, he plans to douse them with pesticides while they rest on trees at



GARDEZ: A wounded Afghan National Army (ANA) soldier rests inside a hospital after an attack on Afghan army base in Gardez, capital of Paktia province yesterday. —AFP

The group said at least one Afghan colleague appeared to have been among those killed in the "revolting" attack.

President Ashraf Ghani blamed both that assault and the funeral bombing on the Taliban and the Islamic State group, ordering Afghan troops to "resume their operations against the enemy".

For weeks Afghan forces had been on a "defen-

sive" posture to ease peace talks with the Taliban.

But the insurgents, who denied involvement in Tuesday's attacks, warned they were "fully prepared" to counter any strikes by Afghan forces.

"From now onwards the responsibility of further escalation of violence and its ramifications shall fall squarely on the shoulders of the Kabul administration," the Taliban said in a statement. —Reuters

Pakistan readies for second battle against crop-devouring locusts

KARACHI: To many farmers in southeast Pakistan, an impending locust attack when summer crops of cotton, sugarcane and rice are being sown, and fruit and vegetables are ready to be picked is a much bigger problem than the coronavirus pandemic.

"If the crops are eaten up by the locusts, we will have a dire food security issue on our hands," said Zahid Bhurgri, a farmer from Mirpur Khas district in Sindh province.

"The price of flour and vegetables will sky-rocket," making staple foods hard for some to afford, added Bhurgri, who is also general secretary of the Sindh Chamber of Agriculture.

The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates losses to agriculture from locusts this year could be as high as PKR 353 billion (\$2.2 billion) for winter crops like wheat and potatoes and about PKR 464 billion for summer crops.

A May update from the FAO warned it would be "imperative" to contain and control the desert locust infestation in the midst of the additional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on health, livelihoods, food security and nutrition for Pakistan's most poor and vulnerable communities.

Last year, Pakistan suffered its worst attack of locusts

night, and get his farmhands to clang pots and pans during the day to drive the pests from his land.

But there are many small-scale farmers who lack the means to deal with the locusts on their own, he added.

Some do not feel confident enough to invest in their crop this year or are cutting costs by not using the required amount of fertiliser, he noted.

CLIMATE CONNECTION

Mubarak Ahmed, national coordinator for locust control at FAO's office in Karachi, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that Pakistan had been taken by surprise last year when locusts wreaked havoc in all its four provinces.

Unprecedented rains that led to vegetation cover in Sindh's Tharparkar desert had enabled the locusts to breed and then attack crop areas, he said.

The country was "relatively better prepared" to meet the challenge this year, he added. But the situation could get worse with huge swarms expected to arrive in the coming two to three months from Iran, Oman and the Horn of Africa.

Locust swarms are not new in East Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. But climate scientists say erratic weather linked to climate change has created ideal conditions for the insects to surge in numbers not seen in a quarter of a century.

Warmer seas have led to more cyclones in the Indian Ocean, causing heavy rainfall along the Arabian Peninsula and in the Horn of Africa, producing the perfect environment for breeding.

Experts say insect populations have found new homes across Pakistan and are now laying eggs in nearly

40% of its territory, including Sindh but mainly in the southwest province of Balochistan.

FAO locust forecaster Keith Cressman said locusts that had unusually stayed in parts of Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Indus Valley during the winter would now move southeast to their summer breeding areas in the Cholistan and Tharparkar deserts from May to July. Swarms breeding in Pakistan's deserts will likely be joined by others from southern Iran in a few weeks, with more likely to arrive from the Horn of Africa around July, experts predict.

The swarms are expected to be much larger than in 2019, because their numbers increase on average 20-fold with each generation. They travel in swarms of between 30 million to 50 million insects, covering a distance of 150 km (93 miles) and devouring 200 tonnes of crops per day.

NATIONAL PLAN

Khan of the Department of Plant Protection, who is the state's focal point for locust control, said the government had been preparing for the next wave of locusts since last year.

In January, the ministry shared a national action plan for surveillance and control of the desert locusts with the prime minister, who declared the locust attacks a national emergency in February.

That helped drive things forward with funding, surveillance and control operations, coordinated with provincial agriculture departments, the National Disaster Management Authority, the FAO and the army, said Khan. —Reuters