

# Algerian bomb blasts linked to al-Qa'ida

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By Claire Soares

The Algerian capital was struck yesterday by two car bomb attacks claiming at least 67 lives. The blasts, within minutes of each other, were carried out by al-Qa'ida's north African wing, which specifically targeted the city's United Nations offices.

The UN said the bodies of 11 of its workers had been recovered by last night. The official death toll was put at 26 but medical workers and rescuers combing the rubble in the upmarket Algiers neighbourhoods of Ben Aknoun and Hydra, home to many diplomats and foreigners, said the toll will be much higher.

Ban Ki-moon, the secretary general of the UN, said: "Words cannot express my sense of shock, outrage and anger at the terrorist attack. This was an abject, cowardly strike against civilian officials serving humanity's highest ideals under the UN banner: base, indecent and unjustifiable by even the most barbarous political standard."

Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (Aqim) later claimed responsibility for the attack, posting a statement on an Islamist website along with pictures of the suicide bombers brandishing assault rifles.

It named the "martyrs" as Abdul-Rahman al-Aasmi and Ami Ibrahim Abou Othman and said they drove cars loaded with 800kg of explosives to the "headquarters of the international infidels' den" on behalf of the "wounded nation of Islam".

It was the group's third attack in the space of year. "It only goes to prove that the Algerian authorities are not in control of the situation," said **Claude Moniquet, the president of the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Centre.**

The last time al-Qa'ida's north African wing struck was in April, when a triple suicide bombing at a police station and the Prime Minister's office in Algiers, killed 33 people. Like yesterday's attack, it also took place on the 11th of the month, which some Algerians see as a way for the home-grown militants to pay homage to the terror attacks of 11 September 2001.

A source at Algeria's Health Ministry told Reuters that at least 67 people had died in yesterday's bombings, with scores more wounded. The casualties included pupils on a school bus. One of the explosions blew the front off the UN refugee agency office and severely damaged another building housing the UN Development Programme.

"There was a massive blast. Everything shattered. Everything fell," a UN employee, Sophie Haspesslagh, told the BBC. "I hid under a piece of furniture so I wouldn't be hit by the debris. There were fumes everywhere. I was holding my jacket on my face because I couldn't breathe."

The apparent targeting of the UN marks a departure for Algerian militants, who until now have mostly focused on domestic targets. It brought back memories of the 2003 bombing of UN buildings in Baghdad, which killed 22 people, including the UN's top envoy to Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello.

Aqim has been styling itself more closely on Islamist militants in Iraq since January, when it ditched its former name, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), and rebranded itself the north African arm of al-Qa'ida. Analysts say that although its concerns and battles are largely domestic, including a recent assassination attempt on President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Aqim has incorporated Iraqi-style tactics including multiple simultaneous suicide attacks.

Yesterday's atrocity was the bloodiest attack in Algeria since an undeclared civil war in the 1990s. Bernard Kouchner, the Foreign Minister of its former colonial ruler, France, said that while Algeria had made progress in fighting terrorism, "the sordid beast is not yet dead".

M. Moniquet said: "All the ... conditions that allowed the terrorists to set up shop in the 1990s are still there today. It's a corrupt, poor country even though it's very rich in resources."

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