

Sunday morning bomb at Christian church in Pakistan kills at least 75

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PESHAWAR, Pakistan - A suicide bomb attack on a church killed at least 75 people as parishioners left the building Sunday, officials said, in what is the biggest attack on Pakistan's Christian community in many years.

Women and children were among the victims of the attack, which took place as a morning service was drawing to a close.

The rapidly-rising death toll reached at least 75 within hours of the blast, Peshawar's police commissioner, Sahibzada Anees, told NBC News.

"A suicide bomber blew himself after entering in to the church hall," deputy police commissioner Zahir ul Islam told NBC News. "There were between 500 to 600 people present in the church" at the time of attack, he added.

In a statement, Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif strongly condemned the bomb blast, expressing solidarity with the Christian community.

He said terrorists have no religion and that the targeting innocent people is against the teachings of Islam.

Christians set fire to tires in protest at the attack, for which nobody has yet claimed responsibility.

"There was no security, police were just standing by," a man cried outside the church.

"After the service ended, people started to come out and the suicide bomber rushed towards them," Najeeb Bogvi, a senior police officer in Peshawar told Reuters.

Christians make up about four percent of Pakistan's population of 180 million and tend to keep a low profile in a country where Islamist militants frequently bomb targets they see as heretical, including Christians and Shi'ites, Reuters reported.

In 2009, 40 houses and a church were set ablaze by a mob of 1,000 Muslims in the town of Gojra in Punjab province. At least seven Christians were burnt to death. The attacks were triggered by reports of the desecration of the Koran.