

Bomb explodes in southeastern Iran

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TEHRAN, Iran - Police and insurgents clashed after a bombing in southeastern Iran late Friday near the site where an explosion killed 11 members of the elite Revolutionary Guards this week, Iranian news agencies reported.

"Minutes ago, the sound of a bomb explosion was heard in one of Zahedan's streets," the state-run news agency IRNA said, without giving more details.

The semiofficial Fars news agency said clashes broke out between Iranian police and armed insurgents after the explosion.

Fars quoted the governor of Zahedan, Hasan Ali Nouri, as saying the blast was a "sound bomb explosion" — a device that creates a loud boom but that usually does not cause casualties.

Nouri said there was gunfire heard but that it was late at night and that police had cordoned off the area.

On Wednesday, a car bomb blew up a bus carrying Revolutionary Guards, killing 11, in Zahedan, capital of Sistan-Baluchestan province, which sits on the border with Pakistan.

A Sunni Muslim militant group called Jundallah, or God's Brigade, which has been blamed for past attacks on Iranian troops, has claimed responsibility for the Wednesday bombing.

Iran has accused the United States of backing militants to destabilize the country. Tensions between Tehran and Washington are growing over allegations of Iranian involvement in attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq, and over Iran's nuclear activities.

Fars said the Friday explosion was at a school in Zahedan.

"The insurgents began shooting at people after the explosion. Clashes are continuing between police and the armed insurgents. Police have cordoned off the area," the Fars agency said.

IRNA quoted an unnamed "responsible official" late Friday as saying that one of those arrested on charges of involvement in Wednesday's bombing, identified as Nasrollah Shanbe Zehi, has confessed that the attacks were part of alleged U.S. plans to provoke ethnic and religious violence in Iran.

The confessions by Zehi helped police detain an unspecified number of Jundallah members and confiscate weapons and documents from the group in a raid Thursday in Zahedan, IRNA also said.

A majority of Iran's population are Shiite Muslims but minority Sunnis live in southeastern Iran.

Friday's blast came just hours after the funeral of the 11 Revolutionary Guardsmen in the capital.

Iran's state-run television showed footage of Zahedan residents marching in the streets with the coffins of the killed Guardsmen. The crowd chanted, "death to hypocrites," in a reference to the insurgents.

The blasts are a sharp flare-up of violence, but the remote southeast corner of Iran, near Pakistan and Afghanistan, has long been plagued by lawlessness. The area is a key crossing point for opium from Afghanistan and often sees clashes between police and drug gangs.

Jundallah, which is believed by some to have links to al-Qaida, has waged a low-level insurgency in the area and is led by Abdulmalak Rigi, a member of Iran's ethnic Baluchi minority, a community that is Sunni Muslim and also can be found in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Rigi has said his group is fighting for the rights of impoverished Sunnis under Iran's Shiite government.

Fars said that Rigi appeared on a station run by an opposition group known as the People's Mujahedeen, which is based in Iraq, minutes before Friday's explosion. The People's Mujahedeen has long sought to overthrow the Iranian government by force.

Iranian officials have often raised concerns that Washington could incite members of Iran's many ethnic and religious minorities against the Shiite-led government in Tehran.

Iran has faced several ethnic and religious insurgencies that have carried out occasionally deadly attacks in recent years - though none have amounted to a serious threat to the government.

In December, Jundallah claimed responsibility for kidnapping seven Iranian soldiers in the Zahedan region, threatening to kill them unless group members were freed from Iranian prisons. The seven were released a month later, apparently after negotiations through tribal mediators.

In March 2006, gunmen dressed as security forces killed 21 people on a highway outside Zahedan in an attack authorities blamed on "rebels," though Jundallah was never specifically named.