

# 17 dead in Saudi bombing

Al-Qaida is being blamed for the car bombing near Riyadh that killed 17 and injured 122 on Saturday

By Evan Osnos  
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

CAIRO — Saudi and U.S. authorities Sunday blamed al-Qaida for the car bombing at a residential compound in Riyadh on Saturday night that killed 17 people, including five children, and injured 122.

The attack left the Saudi regime digging out from the second major suicide bombing in the capital in the last six months and facing the reality that al-Qaida appears to have survived a tough crackdown.

The bombing Saturday struck a complex of villas on the capital's western edge that housed mostly foreign Arab workers, authorities said, and most of the victims were Lebanese, Egyptian and Sudanese.

No Americans were killed, but several were treated for injuries, according to the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh. The embassy, which had closed last week amid warnings of an imminent attack, on Sunday remained shuttered indefinitely, as officials urged U.S. citizens to stay near their homes.

"American diplomats are limiting our movements in Riyadh to our own neighborhood, the diplomatic quarter," embassy spokeswoman Carol Kalin said.

Coordinated and well-equipped, the attack bore similarities to bombings in Riyadh on May 12 that killed 35 people, including eight Americans, and injured nearly 200 people. Since that incident, Saudi authorities have launched a wave of raids on al-Qaida

cells, arresting more than 600 suspected militants and seizing caches of guns and explosives.

Saudi officials on Sunday cast the recent attack as an act of "desperation."

"We know how they organize. We have captured their equipment. We have captured their leaders," said a senior Saudi official. "They knew they couldn't bring trucks into the middle of the city, so they had to find something on the edge of the desert."

In Riyadh for a previously scheduled visit, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said he was "personally quite sure" Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida terror network was behind the attack "because this attack bears the hallmark of them."

Analysts say the latest bombing underscores the mounting struggle between the Saudi royal family and the global network of Islamic militants that condemns its friendship with the West.

"The government campaign certainly seems to have ferreted out some people, (forcing them) to take these operations as quickly as they can," said Mamoun Fandy, an expert on Saudi affairs in Washington, D.C. "Another reading would be that Saudi Arabia is feeling an influx of transnational groups who are moving across borders and opening new fronts."

Citing unnamed sources in Washington, the London-based Arabic daily Al Sharq Al Awsat reported Saturday that 3,000 suspected militants have been arrested in the past three months trying to enter Saudi Arabia from Iraq. Saudi authorities concede they have been unable to staunch a flow of illegal weapons traffic over the border from neighboring Yemen,

which one Saudi official described as the source of "90 percent of the weapons we are seeing."

Since the May bombing, the regime has pursued a two-pronged approach to stemming the source of militant threats, cracking down on suspected cells while introducing measures of political and social reform.

The government has gingerly acted to rein in radical clerics, suspending 2,000 imams for voicing rhetoric that it labeled intolerant. Five hundred have been removed permanently, while 1,500 have been referred to educational programs. The government also announced plans last month to hold its first-ever municipal elections in the next year.

Armitage urged the Saudi government to stay the course of democratization.

"We have the utmost faith that the direction chosen for this nation by Crown Prince Abdullah, the political and economic reforms, will not be swayed by these horrible terrorists," he said.

The attack came just one day after the U.S. Embassy shut its offices throughout the country, citing "credible information" about imminent terrorist attacks. Saudi authorities said the warning came from a joint task force of U.S. and Saudi investigators that was formed after the May attacks.

"As soon as we knew an attack was coming, we warned all the compounds," the Saudi official said. "The indication was that we knew it would be between Friday or Saturday and Tuesday, but we could not know where they would hit."

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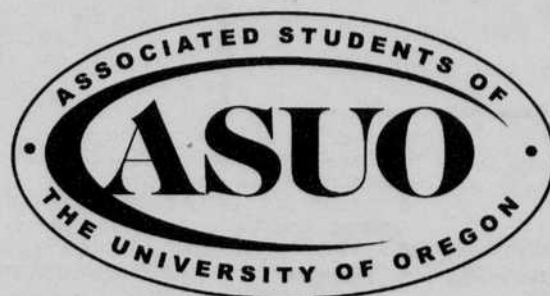
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