

Gunmen Kill World Vision Workers in Pakistan

Suspected Islamic militants armed with guns and grenades stormed the offices of a Christian relief and development organization in northwest Pakistan today, killing six aid workers and wounding seven others.

The gunmen besieged the offices of international humanitarian organization World Vision near Oghi, about 50 miles north of Islamabad in Mansehra district of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Police and World Vision's regional spokesman said the Pakistani staff members, including two women, were killed after up to 15 gunmen arrived in pick-up trucks and began firing.

"They gathered all of us in one room," World Vision administration officer Mohammad Sajid, who was in the office at the time, told Compass. "The gunmen, some of whom had their faces covered, also snatched our mobile phones. They dragged people one by one and shifted them to an adjacent room and shot and killed them."

Rienk van Velzen, World Vision's regional communications director, said from the Netherlands that all staff members in the office were Pakistanis. He said one is missing.

The organization has been operating in the area since October 2005, when aid workers flooded into the northwest after a earthquake killed more than 73,000 people and left about 3.5 million homeless.

But many charities have since left the area as Islamist violence soared. In February 2008, four aid workers with the British-based group Plan International were killed in a similar gun and grenade attack in Mansehra town.

Police said the militants escaped into the hills.

“Police rushed to the area after receiving information about the attack, but the attackers managed to flee,” senior police officer Waqar Ahmed said. “We chased them, there was an exchange of fire, but the gunmen escaped into the mountains.”

Ahmed blamed the attack on “the same people who are destroying our schools” – a reference to Taliban militants opposed to co-education who have blown up hundreds of schools across the northwest in the past three years.

“Now they want to disturb relief work in quake-hit areas,” Ahmed said.

World Vision’s website says the aid group is “inspired by our Christian values” but stresses that it does not proselytize or predicate aid on a person’s faith.

Foreign targets are rarely attacked directly in Pakistan, despite the chronic insecurity in the nuclear-armed, Muslim state, which is a key ally in the war on Al Qaeda and the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan.

A wave of suicide and bomb attacks across Pakistan has killed more than 3,000 people since 2007. Blame has fallen on Taliban and Al Qaeda-linked militants bitterly opposed to the alliance with the United States.

The United Nations decided last year to relocate a limited number of its international staff from Pakistan because of security concerns.

The UN’s World Food Program office in Islamabad was attacked in October last year, with five aid workers killed in a suicide bombing.

Then on Feb. 3, a bomb attack in the NWFP district of Lower Dir killed three U.S. soldiers and five other people at the opening of a school just rebuilt with Western funding after an

Islamist attack.

Elsewhere in the northwest today, police found the bodies of two men the Taliban had accused of spying for the United States. The local tribesmen had been snatched last month from Mir Ali in North Waziristan tribal region, and their “bullet-riddled bodies were found dumped under a bridge,” police officer Dildar Khan said.