

Over 20 dead, more than 30 wounded in Somalia hotel attack

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Mogadishu: A suicide truck bomb exploded outside a popular hotel in Somalia's capital on Saturday, killing at least 23 people and wounding more than 30, and gunfire continued as security forces pursued other attackers inside the building, police said. Two more blasts were heard, one when an attacker detonated a suicide vest.

Somali soldier walk near wreckage of vehicles after a car bomb was detonated in Mogadishu

Captain Mohamed Hussein said more than 20 people, including government officials, were thought to be trapped as the extremists holed up on the top floor of the Nasa-Hablod hotel, close to the presidential palace. Three of the five attackers were killed, Hussein said. The others hurled grenades and cut off the building's electricity as night fell.

Saturday's blasts came two weeks after more than 350 people were killed in a massive truck bombing on a busy Mogadishu street in the country's worst-ever attack.

Al-Shabab, Africa's deadliest Islamic extremist group, quickly claimed responsibility for Saturday's attack and said its fighters were inside the hotel.

Among the dead were a mother and three children, including a baby, all shot in the head, Hussein said. Other victims included a senior Somali police colonel, a former lawmaker and a former government minister. Footage from the scene showed twisted vehicles and nearby buildings with only walls left standing.

Mohamed Dek Haji said he survived the bombing as he walked beside a parked car that was largely destroyed by the explosion. He said he saw at least three armed men in military uniforms running toward the hotel after the bombing at its gate.

"I think they were al-Shabab fighters who were trying to storm the hotel," he said, lying on a hospital bed. He suffered small injuries on his shoulder and skull from flying glass.

Witnesses in some previous attacks have said al-Shabab fighters disguised themselves by wearing military uniforms.

Security officials say Saturday's bomber had pretended his truck had broken down outside the gate. Police Col. Mohamed Abdullahi says the bomber stopped outside the heavily fortified hotel and pretended to repair the truck before finally turning it around and detonating.

Al-Shabab often targets high-profile areas of Mogadishu. It has not commented on the massive attack two weeks ago; experts have said the death toll was so high that the group hesitated to further anger Somali citizens as it pursues its insurgency.

Since the blast two weeks ago, President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed has visited regional countries to seek more support for the fight against the extremist group, vowing a "state of war." He also faces the challenge of pulling together regional powers inside his long-fractured country, where the federal government is only now trying to assert itself beyond Mogadishu and other major cities.

A 22,000-strong multinational African Union force in Somalia is expected to withdraw its forces and hand over the country's security to the Somali military by the end of 2020. U.S. military officials and others in recent months have

expressed concern that Somali forces are not yet ready.

The US military also has stepped up military efforts against al-Shabab this year in Somalia, carrying out nearly 20 drone strikes, as the global war on extremism moves deeper into the African continent.

- AP