

Suicide bomber targets Karnak temple in Egypt's Luxor

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A suicide bomber blew himself up on Wednesday just steps away from the ancient Egyptian temple of Karnak in Luxor, a southern city visited by millions of tourists every year, security and health officials said.

Debris is seen near shops damaged during a foiled suicide attack in Luxor, Egypt on Wednesday. A suicide bomber blew himself up in the parking lot of the Karnak temple in the southern Egyptian city, security sources and witnesses said, in an escalation of attacks on the country's tourist sites.

Shortly after the explosion, police exchanged fire with and killed two suspected militants who had arrived at the sprawling, Nile-side temple together with the suicide bomber, the officials said.

Four people, including two policemen, were wounded in the exchange, according to the Health Ministry in Cairo.

The Governor of Luxor City, Mohammed Sayed Badr, said no tourists were hurt in the bombing outside the famed temple. Speaking to The Associated Press over the phone, he said the attack was "an attempt to break into the temple of Karnak".

"They didn't make it in," he added of the attackers.

Wednesday's attack was the second this month by suspected Islamic militants at or near a major tourist attraction. On June 3, gunmen on a speeding motorcycle opened fire outside the famed Giza Pyramids on the outskirts of Cairo, killing two police officers.

Mr. Badr also offered a slightly different version of how the attack unfolded. He said three men carrying bags got out of a car in the temple's parking lot, which immediately made the police suspicious and policemen ordered them to stop.

One of the three then began running, so the police fired at him and an explosive belt he was wearing blew up. A second man had a gun and started shooting at the police before he was shot and killed. The third attacker was wounded in the shootout and arrested by an undercover policeman.

Mr. Badr said the nationalities of the three men have yet to be determined. Mr. Badr's account and that of the security officials could not immediately be reconciled, but that is common in the immediate aftermath of major attacks.

There were only a handful of tourists and Egyptians inside the temple at the time of the late morning attack, added the security officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

Wednesday's attack was the first to target world-famous attractions in Luxor since November 1997, when Islamic militants opened fire on tourists at the city's 3,400-year-old Hatshepsut Temple on the west bank of the Nile, killing 58.

Tourism is the lifeblood of Luxor, home to some of Egypt's most famous ancient temples and pharaonic tombs, including that of King Tutankhamun. The city has been hit hard by a downturn in foreign visitors during the years of unrest since Egypt's 2011 uprising.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for Wednesday's attack, but it bore the hallmarks of Islamic militants

who have been battling security forces in the strategic Sinai Peninsula for years. Extremists in Sinai have targeted tourism sites to try to deny the government a key source of revenue.

Last year, the Sinai-based insurgent group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group, which has destroyed famed archaeological sites in Syria and Iraq, viewing them as idolatrous.

The campaign of violence in Sinai accelerated and spread to other parts of Egypt following the 2013 military overthrow of Islamist President Mohamed Morsy. The militants say the attacks are in revenge for a massive crackdown on Islamists underway in Egypt.

The attack on the Luxor temple, which sits on the east bank of the Nile, comes as Egypt tries to rehabilitate its vital tourism industry, which accounted for as much as 20 percent of foreign currency revenues before its 2011 revolt that toppled autocrat Hosni Mubarak and later years of turmoil.

From a high of 14.7 million tourists in 2010, Egypt has had an average of around 9 million a year since then, though officials say tourists slowly are coming back. Government officials say the tourism industry saw revenues jump to \$4 billion in the first half of this year, compared to \$1.9 billion in the same period last year.