

Afghanistan: Most of the 16 killed by suspected Taliban were Afghan refugees

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KABUL, June 28 (AFP) - Most of the 16 people killed in a bloody attack in south-central Afghanistan by suspected Taliban were recently returned refugees, the government said Monday.

The group was pulled from their vehicle in Uruzgan province on Friday and shot dead, apparently for carrying voter registration cards, according to a local official.

"Most of the 16 were Hazara people," Interior Ministry spokesman Lutfullah Marshal told AFP on Monday. "They had recently returned from Iran."

"Most of them had registration cards and some of them were due to get registration cards and participate in the elections."

Uruzgan has a small ethnic Hazara population but is mainly ethnic Pashtun.

Millions of Afghans left their homeland during more than two decades of war but since the fall of the Taliban many have returned home, particularly those living in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran.

A series of violent weekend attacks targeting electoral workers and people registered to vote, have come as Afghanistan is set to announce the date of historic elections within days.

The country, ruined by war, is preparing to hold presidential and parliamentary elections in September which will mark the end of the transitional government established following the fall of the Taliban regime in late 2001.

The polls were originally to be held this month but were delayed for security and logistical reasons.

The US-backed government of President Hamid Karzai has insisted the polls will be held as scheduled in September and the United Nations, which is assisting in organising the voting, said Sunday the electoral process would continue despite weekend violence in which 18 people died.

A bomb blast killed two young female voter registration workers and injured eleven other people in eastern Nangarhar province on Saturday.

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