

12 year old was suicide bomber at Turkey wedding, Islamic State 'likely perpetrator': Erdogan

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Ankara: A 12 year old child was the suicide bomber who killed at least 51 people and wounded nearly 70 others at a wedding in Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Sunday, decrying the attack as an apparent attempt by Islamic State extremists to destabilize the nation.

Erdogan

"As of now, the preliminary conclusions by our governor's office and the police establishment point to an attack by Daesh," Erdogan said, using another common term for IS.

"It was clear that Daesh had such an organization in Gaziantep or was attempting to make room for itself in recent times," he said.

The bombing late Saturday in Gaziantep was the deadliest attack in Turkey this year.

It comes amid ongoing struggles between the government and Kurdish militants linked to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, known as the PKK, and as the country is still reeling from the aftermath of last month's failed coup attempt, which the government has blamed on U.S.-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen and his followers.

Erdogan said immediately after the Gaziantep attack, which he blamed on IS, that any strategy "meant to incite the citizens against each other along ethnic and religious lines will not work."

Later, addressing the nation before Istanbul's city hall, Erdogan said the attacker in Gaziantep was aged between 12 and 14. He said 69 people were wounded, with 17 of them in critical condition.

He again blamed the attack on the Islamic State, but there was no immediate claim of responsibility.

The pro-Kurdish political party HDP condemned the attack on the wedding, which it said was attended by many of its party members.

It said in a statement that it was "quite significant" that the attack, which it also blamed on IS, came hours after the Kurdistan Communities Union, a militant organization that includes the PKK, announced plans to try to negotiate to end a three-decade conflict between Kurdish militants and the Turkish government.

"This attack targets those determined and persistent in peace, resolution, and those struggling for democracy, equality, freedom and justice," the HDP said. "The attack was planned to disable the spread of peace and success of possible negotiations."

A bus driver who shuttled some of the guests from Siirt to Gaziantep said that he couldn't believe the party was targeted.

"This was a wedding party. Just a regular wedding party," Hamdullah Ceyhan told the state-run Anadolu Agency. "This attack was deplorable. How did they do such a thing?"

The bride and groom weren't in life-threatening condition and were undergoing treatment, but the groom's sister and uncle were among the dead, Anadolu reported.

Multiple opposition parties denounced the attack, as did many foreign governments including the U.S., Germany, Austria, Russia, Egypt, Sweden, Greece, France, Bahrain, Qatar and Jordan and global institutions including the United Nations, the European Union and NATO.

"We stand by our ally Turkey and pledge to continue to work closely together to defeat the common threat of terrorism," said U.S. Ambassador to Turkey John Bass.

In the Vatican, Pope Francis led hundreds of people in silent prayer for the victims of the attack, concluding by asking "for the gift of peace for everyone."

Security expert Metin Gurcan, a former Turkish military officer and columnist for the online newspaper Al-Monitor, said that IS view the attack as "hitting two birds with one stone" — as retaliation for Syrian Kurdish advances on their forces in Syria, and for Turkey's attacks on IS targets.

Gurcan said in an email to The Associated Press that IS has been trying to agitate or exploit ethnic and religious tensions in Turkey, and "we know very well to what extent wedding attacks can sow disorder in nation's social fabric from the Afghanistan experience."

The suicide bombing follows a June attack on Istanbul's main airport where IS suspects killed 44 people. A dual suicide bombing blamed on IS at a peace rally in Turkey's capital, Ankara, in October killed 103 people.

Meantime, there have also been ongoing attacks claimed by the PKK or linked to the militant group, as well as the coup attempt blamed on Gulen's movement. Gulen has denied any involvement.

Earlier this week, a string of bombings blamed on the PKK that targeted police and soldiers killed at least a dozen people. A fragile, 2½ year peace process between the PKK and the government collapsed last year, leading to a resumption of the three-decade-long conflict.

In the immediate aftermath of the Gaziantep bombing, Erdogan said there was "absolutely no difference" between IS, Kurdish rebels and Gulen's movement, calling them terrorist groups.

Gurcan said, however, that it was a "grave mistake" to lump the three together.

"Putting these three organizations with different political objectives, tactics and techniques into the same basket ... causes the failure of tailoring specific counter strategies," he said.

Following the attack, police sealed off the site of the explosion and forensic teams moved in. Outside the perimeter, hundreds of residents gathered chanting "Allah is great" as well as slogans denouncing attacks.

Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Simsek and the country's health minister traveled to the scene, visiting the wounded and inspecting the site.

"This is a massacre of unprecedented cruelty and barbarism," Simsek told reporters. "We ... are united against all terror organizations. They will not yield."

In Istanbul, HDP supporters organized a rally attended by hundreds Sunday evening to protest the bombing. One participant, shop owner Ercan Yilmaz, 36, told the AP it was "always those kinds of people being targeted — a Kurdish wedding party, opposition groups or people calling for peace in Ankara," referring to the peace rally attacked in October.

"On the other hand, the AKP (Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party) has gatherings and rallies everywhere but they're never bombed," he added.

- (IANS inputs)