

Three Women Working to Vaccinate Children Are Shot Dead in Afghanistan

The health workers were part of the government's polio vaccine campaign in Jalalabad, a city that has seen numerous attacks on women in recent months.



By Adam Nossiter

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Three health workers, all women, working for the government's polio vaccine campaign were shot dead in Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan on Tuesday, local officials said, only weeks after three women working in television were killed in the same city.

The women, all in their 20s, were going about their jobs in the bustling town near the border with Pakistan when they were gunned down in two separate attacks.

Semin, 24, and Basira, 20, who like many Afghans both went by only one name, were shot and killed by two gunmen as they entered a house in Jalalabad to vaccinate the children who lived there, the governor's office said.

The two were going door to door in the city, a practice the Taliban have banned in the past in areas under their control.

It was Semin's first vaccination campaign, said Ahmad Faisal Nizami, the victim's cousin. She had recently been married and had graduated from a teacher training college.

Negina, 24, a supervisor for the polio vaccine campaign, which started in Afghanistan on Monday, was shot and killed about an hour later elsewhere in the city.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the killings.

The Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, rejected any involvement in the incident in a WhatsApp message.

Afghanistan, which recorded 56 cases of polio in 2020, according to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, is one of two countries where the disease has not been eradicated, trailing behind Pakistan.

Around the same time as Tuesday's shootings, there was an explosion at the city's regional hospital, officials said, in front of the compound where the vaccines are stored. There were no casualties, but windows were shattered.

The latest killings — part of a wave of targeted assassinations often singling out women, journalists, professionals, activists and doctors — happened at a fraught moment for Afghanistan as the Taliban have made steady military gains, and relentlessly attack those deemed as collaborating with the Afghan government. Additionally, remnants of the Islamic State operating in the region have focused on carrying out fewer large-scale bombings and more smaller but targeted assaults.

The United States has yet to definitively say whether it will meet the May 1 deadline for withdrawing all American forces, per an agreement the Trump administration signed with the Taliban in February 2020.

"My niece Basira was a poor girl," said Haji Moqbel Ahmad, a tribal elder in Jalalabad, who added that the woman had not been threatened before. "She was shot and killed while she was doing her job."

Basira, a vaccine worker since her teens, had been enlisted for a five-day vaccine campaign for which she would be paid less than \$30, officials said.

The month began with the assassination of three women who worked for a television station in Jalalabad. A female television and radio presenter from the same station was gunned down in much the same way in December. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for both incidents.

The New York Times documented the deaths of at least 136 civilians and 168 security force members in such targeted killings in 2020, more than nearly any other year of the war. So far, 2021 has not seen any reprieve from the same kind of violence.

The Taliban are increasing pressure on government and society, asserting dominance as stuttering, intermittent negotiations take place to settle the Afghan conflict.

Jalalabad has been among the hardest hit cities. A day after the television-worker killings, a female doctor there was killed by a roadside bomb.

Ross Wilson, the U.S. chargé d'affaires in Kabul, denounced Tuesday's killings.

"Such attacks are a direct affront to Afghans' dream of building a better life for their children," Mr. Wilson wrote on Twitter. "My deepest condolences for the victims' families as we call for justice," he wrote. "Attacking vaccinators is as heartless as it is inexplicable."

Humanitarian agencies also expressed outrage. Henrietta Fore, the executive director of Unicef, issued a statement calling the victims "courageous vaccinators who were at the forefront of efforts to combat the spread of polio and keep Afghanistan's children safe from this disabling disease."

Zabihullah Ghazi contributed reporting from Jalalabad, and Fahim Abed from Kabul.