

Ab/12 10.3.11 Terrorismology

Yemenis Kill at least 30 of own soldiers

BOMBING STRIKE

Unit had joined protesters in call for Saleh's ouster

BY AHMED AL-HAJ
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SANAA, Yemen — A government warplane bombed an army position in southern Yemen, killing at least 30 soldiers involved in months of intense battles against al-Qaida members, officials said Sunday.

The strike appeared to be a mistake, but the soldiers hit were from a unit that had defected to side with protesters seeking the president's ouster in Yemen's chapter of the Arab Spring, raising questions about whether the bombing might have been intentional.

Yemen's government and the renegade military units both consider Yemen's al-Qaida branch an enemy. The president's political opponents, however, accuse him of allowing the Islamic extremists to seize control of several towns in southern Yemen earlier this year in a bid to spark fears in the West that without him in power, al-Qaida would take over. The airstrike, which took

place Saturday evening in Abyan province, targeted an abandoned school used as a shelter by soldiers of the army's 119th Brigade who were battling the al-Qaida fighters, military and medical officials said. The brigade is thought to have received significant support from the U.S. military to enable it to fight extremists in the south more effectively.

The school is located just east of Abyan's provincial capital, Zinjibar, seized in May by Islamic rebels taking advantage of Yemen's political turmoil to expand their reach. In recent days, fighting in the area has been heavy; 28 soldiers and extremists were killed there Saturday.

After the airstrike, insurgents inspecting the site shot and killed soldiers who were wounded by the bombing, the military officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to release the information.

Yemen's turmoil is of deep concern to the United States and Europe in large part because of the possibility that al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula would benefit from it and carve out an even bigger haven in Yemen

Bomber's death denied

A top Yemeni official said Sunday a top al-Qaida bomb-maker, Ibrahim al-Asiri, was not killed Friday, when an American drone strike in Yemen killed U.S.-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, a key al-Qaida figure, and Samir Khan, a Pakistani-American who produced the terror group's English-language Web magazine, Inspire. Al-Asiri was linked to the bomb hidden in the underwear of the Nigerian man accused of trying to blow up the plane over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009.



Ibrahim Hasan al-Asiri

Tribal elders Sunday said the convoy targeted in the strike may have included a third car that escaped. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they feared reprisals for speaking to the media.

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from which to plot attacks on the West.

The group was behind several nearly successful strikes on U.S. targets, including the failed attempt in 2009 to blow up a Detroit-bound jetliner with explosives sewn into the underwear of a would-be suicide bomber.

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Yemen's crisis began in February when protesters inspired by Arab uprisings across the region took to the streets to demand President Ali Abdullah Saleh step down after 33 years in office. The government responded with a bloody

crackdown that has included the use of pro-regime snipers to pick off unarmed demonstrators.

In the months since, government forces have also battled armed anti-Saleh tribesmen and another renegade army unit, the elite 1st

Armored Division, which defected to the opposition in March.

That fighting has transformed parts of Sanaa into war zones, with mortar shells and rockets tearing through buildings in the capital for weeks.

On Sunday, a mortar shell struck a school in Sanaa, killing a girl and wounding six others. It was not clear which side fired the shell.

ALSO

Syrian dissidents formally established on Sunday a broad-based national council designed to overthrow President Bashar Assad's regime, which they accused of pushing the country to the brink of civil war. The announcement of the Syrian National Council was made at a news conference in Istanbul, Turkey, and follows five days of intense battles between the Syrian military and army defectors in the country's central region.