

Pakistan's Bhutto assassinated at rally

By SADAQAT JAN and ZARAR KHAN, Associated Press Writers

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Pakistan opposition leader Benazir Bhutto was assassinated Thursday in a suicide attack that also killed at least 20 others at the end of a campaign rally, aides said.

The death of the 54-year-old charismatic former prime minister threw the campaign for the Jan. 8 election into chaos and created fears of mass protests and an eruption of violence across the volatile south Asian nation.

The attacker struck just minutes after Bhutto addressed a rally of thousands of supporters in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, 8 miles south of Islamabad. She was shot in the neck and chest by the attacker, who then blew himself up, said, Rehman Malik, Bhutto's security adviser.

At least 20 others were killed in the attack.

Bhutto was rushed to the hospital and taken into emergency surgery.

"At 6:16 p.m. she expired," said Wasif Ali Khan, a member of Bhutto's party who was at Rawalpindi General Hospital.

"The surgeons confirmed that she has been martyred," Bhutto's lawyer Babar Awan said.

Bhutto's supporters at the hospital exploded in anger, smashing the glass door at the main entrance of the emergency unit. Others burst into tears. One man with a flag of Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party tied around his head was beating his chest.

Some at the hospital began chanting, "Killer, Killer, Musharraf," referring to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, Bhutto's main political opponent. A few began stoning cars outside.

"We repeatedly informed the government to provide her proper security and appropriate equipment including jammers, but they paid no heed to our requests," Malik said.

Nawaz Sharif, another former premier and opposition leader, arrived at the hospital and sat silently next to Bhutto's body. Earlier on Thursday, four people were killed at a rally for Sharif when his supporters clashed with backers of Musharraf near Rawalpindi.

In Washington, the State Department said it was seeking confirmation of Bhutto's condition.

"Certainly, we condemn the attack on this rally," deputy spokesman Tom Casey said. "It demonstrates that there are still those in Pakistan who want to subvert reconciliation and efforts to advance democracy."

The United States has for months been encouraging Musharraf to reach an accommodation with the opposition, particularly Bhutto, who was seen as having a wide base of support in Pakistan. Her party had been widely expected to do well in parliamentary elections set for next month.

Bhutto served twice as Pakistan's prime minister between 1988 and 1996. She had returned to Pakistan from an eight-year exile on Oct. 18. On the same day, her homecoming parade in Karachi was also targeted by a suicide attacker, killing more than 140 people. On that occasion she narrowly escaped injury.

At the scene of the bombing, an Associated Press reporter saw body parts and flesh scattered at the back gate of the Liaquat Bagh park where Bhutto had spoken. He counted about 20 bodies, including police, and could see many other wounded people.

Party supporter Chaudry Mohammed Nazir said that two gunshots rang out when Bhutto's vehicle pulled into the main

street and then there was a big blast next to her car.

Police cordoned off the street with white and red tape, and rescue workers rushed to put victims in ambulances as people wailed nearby.

The clothing of some of the victims was shredded and people put party flags over their bodies. Police caps and shoes littered the asphalt.

Hundreds of riot police had manned security checkpoints to guard the venue. It was Bhutto's first public meeting in Rawalpindi since she came back to the country.

In November, Bhutto had also planned a rally in the city, but Musharraf forced her to cancel it, citing security fears.

In recent weeks, suicide bombers have repeatedly targeted security forces in Rawalpindi, a city near the capital where Musharraf stays and the Pakistan army has its headquarters.

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