

# Morocco says Marrakech blast an act of terrorism

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Morocco said today a bomb that killed 15 people, many of them foreigners, in its busiest tourist destination was a terrorist act.

The blast ripped through a cafe overlooking Marrakesh's Jamaa el-Fnaa square, a spot often packed with foreign tourists, at lunch-time on Thursday.

Moroccan officials have not said who was responsible but western security analysts said it was likely to have been the work of Islamist militants in an attempt to damage the tourism industry, one of the country's biggest sources of revenue.

The Interior Ministry issued a statement saying seven of the 15 dead had so far been identified. They included two French citizens, two Canadians, a Dutch national and two Moroccans.

Israel's foreign ministry said two of the victims, a man and a woman, were Jews living in Shanghai and that the woman apparently had Israeli citizenship.

The attack, in which 23 people were also wounded, is the deadliest Morocco has seen since suicide bombers killed 33 people in coordinated strikes on the business hub Casablanca eight years ago.

"Preliminary investigation ... suggests that this was a terrorist act caused by an explosive device," the official MAP news agency quoted Interior Minister Taieb Cherkaoui as saying.

Two Marrakesh residents who were near the square told Reuters the explosion was carried out by a suicide bomber, but there was no confirmation of this and no immediate claim of responsibility.

Quoting an unnamed security official familiar with the investigation, the independent news portal Lakome.com also said it was a suicide attack.

According to the portal's source, the bomber was freed from prison two months ago after having been sentenced to eight years in jail for rape.

The attack adds to the challenges facing Morocco's ruler, King Mohammed, at a time when he is trying to prevent uprisings elsewhere in the Arab world from reaching the kingdom, which is usually seen as a haven of stability in a volatile region.

The monarch has promised to reform the constitution to placate protesters. But more protests are planned for Sunday.

Tourism is Morocco's biggest source of foreign currency and the second biggest employer after agriculture.

Speaking on a visit to Madrid, Finance Minister Salaheddine Mezouar said the country was determined not to let the attack dent confidence in the tourism industry.

"To go to a country as a tourist and return dead is a terrible thing," Mezouar told reporters. "We are going to work very hard so that this does not have an impact on tourism in Marrakesh."

Moroccan state television broadcast pictures of tourists milling around the square where the blast happened. "Life goes on," the television anchor said.

The square is in the Marrakesh medina, or old city, which is designated by the United Nation's cultural arm as a World Heritage Site. It is usually packed with stalls, story-tellers and snake-charmers seeking to attract tourists.

The roof over the cafe's upstairs terrace was ripped off by the force of the explosion and pieces of plaster and electrical wires hung from the ceiling.

A Reuters photographer at the scene of the explosion on Thursday said he saw rescue workers pulling dismembered bodies from the wreckage. A doctor at a Marrakesh hospital said that some of the wounded had lost limbs in the blast.

"I heard a massive blast. The first and second floors of the building were destroyed," said one local woman, who did not want to be identified. "Some witnesses said they saw a man carrying a bag entering the cafe before the blast."

A Frenchman who owns a restaurant in the city said the explosion would hit a local tourism industry already struggling with the impact of the global slowdown and unrest in the Arab world.

"You can't find a more emblematic target than Jamaa el-Fnaa square," he said.

Western security analysts said the bombing carried the hallmarks of Islamist militants, possibly with ties to al Qaeda's north African wing, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Last week, men claiming to be Moroccan members of AQIM appeared in a video posted on YouTube threatening to attack Moroccan interests.

A masked speaker, who identified himself as Abu Abdulrahman, said the planned attacks were to avenge the detention of Islamists by Moroccan authorities.

Thursday's attack on "a place crowded with foreigners at lunch time ... demonstrates a clear will to target 'infidels' and destabilize the kingdom by hitting its economy," **the ESISC** think tank said.

"We assess it must be the work of a well organised terrorist organization. Likely a terrorist cell linked to AQIM ... or the local Moroccan Islamist Combat Group," it said.