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11am

Gunmen kill Hamas-linked judge

Staff and agencies
Wednesday December 13, 2006
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A prominent Islamic judge linked to Hamas was today shot dead by Palestinian gunmen as he arrived at court in the Gaza Strip.

Bassam al-Fara, a civil court judge and a senior member of the faction's armed wing, was killed in the southern town of Khan Younis, Palestinian sources said.

The drive-by shooting came two days after the three young children of a Fatah-allied Palestinian intelligence officer were killed as they were driven to school, sparking renewed conflict between the Hamas and Fatah factions.

Escalating tensions in the area have reduced the chances of the two sides forming a united government, instead pushing them closer to all-out hostilities.

In a statement to reporters, Hamas openly blamed Fatah for today's killing. Fauzi Barhoum, a spokesman for the militant group, said the perpetrators would be brought to justice.

"This is an ugly crime committed against one of the field commanders of the Hamas military wing and one of the prominent figures in Hamas," he said.

"Hamas is not going to forget the blood of its members. It is going to pursue and bring to justice those who were involved in today's crime."

Tawfik Abu Khoussa, a Fatah spokesman, rejected the Hamas accusations. "We condemn all acts of anarchy, whatever may be behind them ... we call on the brothers in Hamas to stop firing accusations before the investigation," he said.



Palestinian women and children at a rally protesting at the killing of three children of intelligence officer Bahaa Balousheh and their driver Mahmud al Habel. Photograph: Mohammed Saber

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Witnesses to the ambush said four gunmen waited for Mr Fara outside the courthouse, eating their breakfast at a nearby food stand.

When he emerged from a taxi, three of the men grabbed him and forced him to his knees and the fourth pulled out a weapon and shot him.

Dozens of people gathered at the scene as Palestinian security officials set up roadblocks. Hamas militants also set up their own roadblocks throughout Khan Younis as they searched for the gunmen.

Fatah, led by the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, and Hamas have been locked in a power struggle since Hamas ousted Fatah in parliamentary elections.

More than 40 Palestinians in Gaza have died in battles between the two groups since Hamas took power in March.

In an attempt to end the standoff, Mr Abbas has been attempting to persuade Hamas to join Fatah in a national unity government.

However, talks broke down last month and tensions heightened further over the weekend as Mr Abbas announced plans to call early elections, sparking Hamas claims that he was planning a coup.

The latest violence was sparked by Monday's Gaza City killing of the three young sons of Baha Balousheh, an intelligence officer and Fatah loyalist who helped lead a crackdown on Hamas a decade ago.

Hamas has denied accusations by Fatah officials that it carried out the murders. Mr Balousheh, who was not in the car, has survived two assassination attempts.

Yesterday, large protests broke out in several Palestinian cities in the West Bank and Gaza. Six people were wounded by gunfire, hospital officials said.

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