

Afghan puppet government shaken by twin attacks

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The US-installed government of Afghanistan has been staggered by two violent attacks delivered only three hours apart. A powerful car bomb killed dozens of people on a busy shopping street in Kabul about 3 p.m., Thursday, September 5. Just after 6 p.m. the same day, interim President Hamid Karzai narrowly escaped assassination in Kandahar, the largest city in southern Afghanistan.

The bombing in Kabul was carefully staged to cause the maximum number of casualties among innocent civilians. A small explosion destroyed a bicycle on a street crowded with shoppers preparing for Friday, the Muslim holy day. The blast attracted a crowd of onlookers who then fell victim to a much larger bomb in a nearby parked car, which detonated three minutes later.

An estimated 150 pounds of explosives turned the vehicle, a taxicab, into twisted metal, dismembered or burned people along much of a city block, and smashed windows as far as 150 yards away. No accurate count of the dead could be obtained—estimates ranged from 25 to 36—because of the large number of body parts and the panic caused by the blast. Those injured numbered at least 150. Many of the victims were women and children.

The failed assassination attempt against Karzai took place as the Afghan head of state was visiting his home city of Kandahar for the wedding of a younger brother. Karzai's entourage was making its way by car through the middle of the city, and he was waving to onlookers and shaking hands, when a uniformed gunman emerged from the crowd and opened fire with an automatic weapon.

American Special Operations soldiers assigned to Karzai's bodyguard returned fire and killed the gunman, who was later identified as Abdul Rahman from Kajaki in Helmand Province, a Taliban stronghold. Abdul Rahman had enlisted as a security guard in the armed forces of Kandahar governor Gul Agha Shirzai only three weeks

ago.

There were conflicting accounts of the assassination attempt, including the number of assailants. The American bodyguards killed two other men when they opened fire on Abdul Rahman, but these have been described variously as bystanders, accomplices of the would-be assassin, or Afghan security guards working for Karzai or Shirzai. One American soldier was lightly wounded in the exchange of fire.

Karzai was unhurt, but his escape was narrow. Bullet holes were found in the seat-back cushion of the car in which he was riding, and in one of the side windows. Shirzai, who was sitting next to Karzai, was hit in the neck, although the wound was said to be minor. Initial press accounts suggested that the governor rather than the interim president might have been the gunman's target, but Afghan officials later declared that Karzai was certainly the intended victim.

American troops have been deployed as Karzai's bodyguards for nearly two months, since the assassination of Vice President Abdul Qadir July 6 in Kabul. The US soldiers replaced security men provided by the Afghan Defense Ministry and secret police, both agencies controlled by Karzai's rivals in the Northern Alliance, who were felt to be less than reliable.

The circumstances of the latest assassination attempt—in Pashtun-populated Kandahar, where the Northern Alliance has little influence, and with a Pashtun gunman—suggest that the attack was launched by local forces, possibly supporters of the ousted Taliban regime or of Al Qaeda.

At least six people were arrested in the aftermath of the shooting. All were armed when they were picked up outside the residence of Governor Shirzai. A spokesman for Shirzai said that one of those arrested was his former head of security, Sayed Rasoul, a fact which suggests high-level political intrigue behind the assassination attempt.

Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah, a leader of the Northern Alliance, blamed both the Kabul and Kandahar attacks on Al Qaeda. Citing the anniversaries of the assassination of Northern Alliance commander Ahmed Shah Massoud (September 9, 2001) and the September 11 suicide hijackings, Abdullah said, "This has been anticipated in the run-up to September 9 and 11, that the terrorist groups will make an attempt to show that they are not gone, and that the antiterrorist campaign has not been successful."

Other officials suggested that Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, former leader of a US-backed Islamic militia and onetime prime minister, might have been responsible for the Kabul atrocity. Hekmatyar, an ethnic Pashtun driven from power by the Taliban, returned to Afghanistan in March and has called for a "holy war" against foreign forces. He reportedly issued a taped message the day before the September 5 attacks, calling for "all true Muslim Afghans" to rise up against the US and its allies.

It is difficult to say which version of events is worse for the Bush administration's claims of great progress in the pacification of Afghanistan: that Al Qaeda retains sufficient organizational capability and political support to mount two simultaneous operations, 300 miles apart, in the two main centers of foreign military presence; or that opposition to the Karzai government is so widespread that two such events could take place independently of each other on the same day.

The Kabul explosion followed a series of smaller-scale bombings in the capital city, eight in all since August 15. The former Soviet embassy was hit by a bomb September 1 and bomb threats to the German, British and US embassies prompted high-security alerts at those facilities. One bomb was directed at a motorized patrol of British soldiers, part of the International Security Assistance Force deployed in Kabul to prop up the Karzai government.

After his return to the capital, Karzai renewed his appeal for an expansion of ISAF from Kabul to several other major cities, including Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat and Jalalabad. Nearly 5,000 soldiers from 20 countries are deployed in and around Kabul, but the Bush administration has vetoed suggestions that ISAF be expanded to other cities, reserving the rest of the country for US military operations against Al Qaeda and Taliban remnants.

Only hours before the attacks in Kabul and Kandahar, Bush administration officials had indicated they were considering shifting their position on expansion of the

ISAF. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, in a speech at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said the ISAF could play a wider role in policing Afghanistan. Wolfowitz revealed that State Department Foreign Service officers have already been dispatched to several of the regional centers to work with Special Forces troops in suppressing armed conflicts among local warlords.

The shift in US policy is not a response to lobbying from Karzai, but the product of pressure from the Pentagon, which wants to disengage as much of the US military force in Afghanistan as possible, especially Special Forces and other elite units, in preparation for future military operations against Iraq. Last week General Tommy Franks, head of the US Central Command, discussed the "desirability of expanding the International Security Assistance Force" during a press conference at Bagram Air Base, outside Kabul.

The Bush administration's dilemma is that no other major power is willing to provide much manpower and money for a military force whose purpose is to prop up a regime wholly subservient to the United States. Wolfowitz indicated that one major problem facing the US in Afghanistan was to find a country willing to assume command of ISAF in December, when Turkey completes its six months in that role.

Great Britain held the ISAF command from December through June, in keeping with the Blair government's policy of serving as the principal sidekick for American militarism around the world. The Turkish government was bribed to take over command in June, with a huge loan from the IMF and American military aid.

There is no obvious successor in sight, however, since most of the 20 countries participating have contributed only a handful of troops. Germany, with one of the largest contingents, is likely considered unsuitable because of German Chancellor Schroder's vocal opposition to a unilateral American attack on Iraq.



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