

Anti-Karzai attack in Kabul shakes US puppet government

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Sunday's armed attack on Afghan President Hamid Karzai in the center of Kabul was a stark demonstration of the isolation of the US-backed government and the growing striking power of anti-occupation forces throughout the country.

Karzai narrowly escaped with his life. Cabinet ministers, members of parliament, Afghan and NATO military officials and foreign diplomats, including US Ambassador William Wood, ducked and ran or were whisked to safety when anti-government forces opened fire on a military parade being held to celebrate the 16th anniversary of the overthrow of the Soviet-backed government in 1992.

Insurgent forces targeted the reviewing stand for the Mujahedeen Day commemoration, situated across from the city's largest mosque. They employed small arms fire and mortars or rocket-propelled grenades, killing one member of parliament and a Shiite clan leader and wounding another 12 people. A 10-year-old boy was killed in the crossfire between the attackers and security forces.

The Taliban immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it was carried out by a team of six militants. Later in the day, a second Islamist group, headed by former US ally Glubuddin Hekmatyar, said it had carried out the assault.

Since the attack, the government has rounded up hundreds of suspects in Kabul and sealed off entire sections of the city, while intelligence officials conduct dragnet-style searches.

The ability of anti-occupation forces to launch such an attack is all the more remarkable given the extraordinary measures that were taken to secure the event, which was being televised live across the country. Days in advance, Afghan troops and police cordoned off the area, posting plainclothes officers throughout the city and setting up vehicle checkpoints. Pedestrians were barred from

surrounding hilltops overlooking the site of the ceremony. Soldiers in tanks and armored cars were deployed at the parade grounds, which are situated close to the presidential palace.

The attack began as the national anthem was being played and military guards were firing off a 21-gun salute. Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the British ambassador, who was standing in the front row of the VIP reviewing stand, told the press afterward: "I saw an explosion and a puff of dust to the left and then heard the crackle of small arms fire from all directions."

The TV transmission continued for some two minutes after the attack began, showing hundreds of Afghan soldiers running from the scene along with journalists and spectators. An Associated Press reporter on the scene said, "To our surprise, uniformed soldiers and armed police followed hot on our heels. Uniformed musicians of the marching band also ran away."

Commenting on the debacle for the government and its US and NATO sponsors, Ramazan Bashardost, an Afghan member of parliament, said, "There is no security force in Afghanistan that people trust. If you pay attention to yesterday's incident, the security forces fled the area before the ordinary people did."

The attackers reportedly fired automatic weapons and explosives from the third floor of a derelict hotel located some 300 yards from the VIP reviewing stand, a spot within the security perimeter set up by the police and military. Security forces were posted outside the hotel, usually occupied by homeless people and poor transients, but evidently had not searched the rooms.

One grenade or mortar exploded only 20 meters from the viewing stand, and the Taliban claimed its fighters got within 30 yards of the spot where Karzai and the assembled dignitaries were standing.

Afghan military forces assaulted the hotel and killed three of the attackers, all of whom were identified as

Afghan nationals from different parts of the country. Another three insurgents were arrested.

The security implications for the Karzai government and its US sponsors were compounded by the ability of the would-be assassins to get so close to the president. As the *New York Times* commented, that fact “suggested they had inside help.”

Some two hours after the attack, Karzai, who had been scuttled to safety via a rear exit from the parade grounds, addressed the nation, improbably praising the Afghan security forces for surrounding the insurgents and saying, “Thank God, now everything is alright and the people of Afghanistan should be calm and confident.”

But the incident was a humiliating blow to the regime, whose relations with its American backers have become somewhat strained in recent months. Karzai has criticized the US and NATO for not allowing his military and security forces to take control of the capital. And just one day before the attack he told the *New York Times* that he supported the new Pakistani government’s plan to negotiate for peace with Taliban and Al Qaeda militants.

Sunday’s attack has shattered the pretense that Karzai is anything other than a US puppet, totally dependent on American and NATO forces not only for his continued rule, but for his continued existence.

It was the second major insurgent attack in Kabul this year. In January a suicide squad attacked a luxury hotel frequented by top officials and foreign diplomats and military personnel.

It was the fourth assassination attempt against Karzai, but the previous ones all occurred outside Kabul. Up to now, Karzai has been largely restricted in his movements to his fortified compound in the capital, while ever greater portions of the country have come under either partial or total control of the Taliban and other anti-government forces. Now, his ability to move around Kabul, even under massive guard, is in doubt.

A Taliban spokesman cited the attack as a refutation of US claims that the Taliban is on the defensive. “Karzai and his cabinet can’t be safe from Taliban attacks,” spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Reuters.

The attack takes place in the context of a sharp increase in US and NATO troop levels and rising violence against the population. The US has raised its contingent in the country to some 32,000 troops in recent months in an attempt to counter a growing presence of the Taliban in the south and east and an increase in the strength of Hekmatyar’s Hizb-i-Islami forces in the north. Altogether, the US and NATO have some 70,000 troops

in the country.

Nearly 12,000 Afghans have been killed over the past two years.

But the insurgency continues to spread. A recent study by Sami Kovanen, an analyst with the security firm Vigilant Strategic Services of Afghanistan, reports 465 insurgent attacks in areas outside the already volatile southern regions during the first three months of 2008, a 35 percent increase compared with the same period last year.

In the central region around Kabul there have been 80 insurgent attacks from January through March of 2008, a 70 percent rise compared to the first three months of 2007.

In the southern and southeastern provinces, including the insurgent centers of Kandahar and Helmand, guerilla attacks rose by 40 percent, according to Kovanen.

Antonio Giustozzi, a researcher at the London School of Economics, reports that Hizb-i-Islami is growing in the north, and local officials say the Taliban is gaining strength in some districts in the far west of the country. According to the deputy governor of Faryab Province, guerillas launched 17 attacks in neighboring Badghis Province in the first three months of this year, compared to one attack during the same period last year.

Sunday’s attack will likely be used to justify a further escalation of US military violence and a major increase in American troop strength in Afghanistan. Both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, the contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination, have called for more US forces in that country, and the newly appointed commander of the US Central Command, Gen. David Petraeus, has suggested that the small reduction in US troops in Iraq be used to bolster the US presence in Afghanistan.



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