

Afghanistan: Mass prison break underscores crisis of US-backed regime

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16 June 2008

Large numbers of US-led NATO troops together with Afghan puppet forces continued a largely fruitless search over the weekend for more than 1,000 prisoners who escaped from a fortress-like jail in the southern city of Kandahar.

The spectacular raid that freed them began Friday night when a suicide bomber drove an explosives-laden water tanker into the main gate of the Sarposa prison. Then, a second bomber struck the rear of the facility, opening a breach in the wall. In the wake of the explosions, some 30 guerrilla fighters mounted on motorbikes attacked the prison with rocket-propelled grenades and machinegun fire, killing 15 guards before systematically opening all the cells and spiriting hundreds of political prisoners away in waiting mini-vans.

The attack represented a humiliation for the Western-backed government of President Hamid Karzai, underscoring its weakness, incompetence and corruption. It likewise points to the failure of the US-led NATO occupation to suppress the growing insurgency, despite the deployment of record numbers of foreign troops in the country.

In the wake of the prison break, US forces suffered their deadliest attack thus far this year when a roadside bomb exploded under a Humvee in the southwestern province of Farah on Saturday, claiming the lives of four Marines.

As of Sunday, Afghan officials claimed to have recaptured only 20 of the escaped prisoners. According to a NATO spokesman, more than 1,150 escaped. The Afghan regime's deputy justice minister, Mohammad Qasim Hashimzai, told the Reuters news agency that the prison breakout "was a very unprecedented attack." He said that the regime's officials "are busy finding out what really happened. We are trying to find out if

there was any inside help."

Such "inside help" has already been identified in a previous spectacular attack, in which gunmen infiltrated a military parade marking a national holiday in Kabul last April, opening fire on the crowd and barely missing Karzai. Officials from within the defense and interior ministries were arrested last month for participating in the plot.

These events have led to a growing sense internationally that the Karzai government is teetering on the brink of collapse. The prison break came just a day after an international conference in Paris pledged \$20 billion for reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. The conference donors, however, found themselves compelled to issue statements calling on the Afghan regime to combat corruption and fight for the "rule of law." Many have expressed skepticism that the funds will go to national development rather than into the foreign bank accounts of Karzai's supporters.

In the hunt for the escaped detainees, NATO troops together with Afghan soldiers, police and security officials threw a cordon around Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban, which was ousted from power by the US invasion of 2001. The security forces erected roadblocks and launched house-to-house searches.

Meanwhile, US-led forces at the nearby Kandahar Airfield sent up spy planes, including pilotless drones, in an attempt to search areas outside the city for the missing prisoners.

The French news agency AFP reported that one of the escapees had called reporting that those sprung from the jail had made it to safety.

"They came in and freed us," said the man, who identified himself as Abdullah. "A number of us who would not fit in the buses escaped through pomegranate gardens. We all are in safe places now."

Kandahar is barely a two-hour drive from the border with Pakistan, where it is suspected that some of the prisoners may have found safe haven.

Human rights groups in Afghanistan, meanwhile, said that the success of the prison break was at least in part a measure of the horrific treatment meted out to the inmates, many of whom had been detained by US forces, but then were handed over to Afghan authorities under an agreement reached last year.

While government and NATO officials reported that some high- and middle-level Taliban commanders were among the escapees, the Afghanistan Human Rights Organization (AHRO) said that many held there were merely caught up in security sweeps.

Several hundred prisoners had been on hunger strike, and approximately 40 had sewn their lips shut in protest over being held without charges, in some cases for two years or more, undergoing systematic torture.

AHRO representatives said that they had warned the Afghan regime that the anger and desperation of both the prisoners and their families in the surrounding area was creating a major security threat.

“Many of the prisoners who have now escaped from Sarposa suffered unimaginable torture and have severe mental problems as a result of the abuse,” said AHRO chairman, Lal Gul, an attorney. “Prisoners had complained of sexual abuse using trained dogs, and physical torture resulting in the loss of limbs or body parts. People in the region were understandably outraged by these abuses, and they felt increasingly desperate since most of the people being held there had nothing to do with the Taliban.”

The human rights representative said that the Taliban was gaining support in the area both because of these abuses and because of the stepped-up US bombing campaign that has claimed the lives of civilians, including women and children.

The Afghan regime has adopted the standards used by the Bush administration in the so-called “war on terror,” denying detainees labeled as Taliban supporters any rights either as criminal suspects or prisoners of war. The inevitable result has been their torture both in US and in Afghan custody.

Nearly seven years after Washington launched its “Operation Enduring Freedom” with air strikes and a ground intervention in Afghanistan, and with nearly 70,000 US and other NATO troops occupying the

country, the insurgency is gaining strength. Popular hostility toward the foreign occupation and the Karzai regime has been fed by the killing of civilians in US air strikes, the government’s repression and corruption, and pervasive poverty and hunger.

Hundreds of people protested Saturday against civilian deaths caused by a US bombing raid in the southeastern province of Paktia.

Attacks by insurgent forces in the country’s eastern region, occupied primarily by US troops, increased by 50 percent in April, according to the grim statistics provided by the outgoing US commander of NATO forces in the country, Gen. Dan McNeill, at a Pentagon press conference Friday.

The attacks have, for the first time, pushed recent US casualties in Afghanistan higher than those suffered in Iraq. Seventeen US soldiers and Marines died in Afghanistan last month, compared to 14 in Iraq. The number of other NATO troops killed in the country reached 23, the highest monthly toll since last August. Eight American troops have been killed in Afghanistan thus far this month.



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