

# 500 Afghan insurgents escape from high-security Kandahar prison

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In an audacious operation that required months of planning and activity, some 500 Taliban insurgents, including 100 commanders, escaped to freedom from a high-security prison in Afghanistan early Monday morning. Also among those freed, according to the Taliban, were two shadow governors and 14 shadow district governors.

Afghan, US and UK officials and media described the prison break variously as a “black eye,” a “nightmare,” a “disaster,” and a “blow.”

According to media reports and interviews with some of those involved in the escape effort, a team of supporters of the insurgency, armed with professional equipment and expertise, spent some five months tunneling into the prison. The prison warden claimed the tunnel ran about 4,000 feet (1,200 meters) from the southwestern corner of the Sarposa prison complex. Electricity and air pipes were apparently used.

Some observers pointed out that hauling away the tons of dirt, reportedly from a compound belonging to an insurgency supporter, would have required using a convoy of pickup trucks, trailers and donkey carts over the five-month period—and the universal silence or support of local residents.

The escape tunnel, reportedly 3 feet wide and 8 feet high, ran under security posts, multiple checkpoints, concrete barriers topped with barbed wire and a major highway. Also, notes the *Washington Post*, “40 well-armed American soldiers [were] watching from perimeter guard towers with Afghan police.”

Reuters reports, “Images of the tunnel released so far show a hole about one meter wide, descending into compacted dirt with footholds in the tunnel sides. Steel poles were used to place car jacks under the concrete cell floor, cracking it open.” The tunnel diggers reportedly broke through the prison’s floor around 11 pm on Sunday.

The hundreds of detainees (the Taliban claimed 541 escaped, while the Afghan government put the figure at 488) proceeded in small groups to enter the tunnel and exit it at the other end over a period of four and a half hours. No

guard intervened and no shots were fired.

Presumably, the plotters had inside help. An inmate who claimed to the Associated Press to have helped organize the escape explained that he had used connections to obtain copies of the keys to other cells in advance.

“There were four or five of us who knew that our friends were digging a tunnel from the outside,” Mohammad Abdullah, sentenced to two years at Sarposa after he was caught with a weapons cache, told AP. “Some of our friends helped us by providing copies of the keys. When the time came at night, we managed to open the doors for friends who were in other rooms.”

One 28-year-old escapee explained in a telephone interview, “I only found out that we were going to escape at midnight. They only let a certain number of people go through at one time, because they wanted to make sure there was enough air to breathe in the tunnel.”

Allah Mohammed Agha, 22, told *New York Times* reporters he “knew nothing” of the escape plan “until a fellow inmate tugged his sleeve to wake him in the night.” Once in the house at the other end of the tunnel, “a waiting car took the fighter a few miles away, where he hailed a taxi to safety.”

“We all escaped in a very organized manner,” another commented. “No one knew that we had escaped until morning, and by then we had reached our villages and homes. Many among us were seriously ill or injured. They were very harsh to us. ... When I asked other escapees, they said they had all come out of the same tunnel and went to safe regions.” Many of the prisoners escaped barefoot.

Perhaps to protect their inside help, the escapees denied receiving any assistance from prison employees or officials. The McClatchy-Tribune wire service cited the comment of an escapee that the guards “‘were just sleeping,’ he said, amid extended laughter. ‘The guards are always drunk. Either they smoke heroin or marijuana, and then they just fall asleep. During the whole process no one checked, there was no patrols, no shooting or anything.’”

He added, “We had the full support of the people of Kandahar, who provided us with clothes and safe places to go. We have proved that whatever we want to do in Kandahar or anywhere else in the country, we can do it.”

Sarposa prison was the scene of a massive jailbreak in 2008, when some 1,000 inmates escaped—half of them Taliban supporters—after suicide bombers detonated a truck bomb against the side of the prison compound. The US, Canada and other countries subsequently spent millions of dollars to repair and upgrade the prison and its administration, supposedly making the compound invulnerable.

The *Washington Post* noted Monday, “Kandahar’s largest detention facility had become so secure, said an American military officer giving a tour of the prison this year, that the only way to break through was to ‘put a nuke on a motorcycle.’”

“Or,” added the *Post* derisively, “to dig more than 1,000 feet of underground tunnels and pop up into the middle of the prison, as the Taliban did early Monday.”

The prison break is a setback, both materially and psychologically, to the US and its allies. A spokesman for Afghan puppet president Hamid Karzai called the mass escape “a blow” and “bad news and a disaster.”

The Sarposa jailbreak comes in the wake of a series of recent Taliban attacks on some of the most supposedly secure facilities in Afghanistan. Muhammad Naiem Lalay Hamidzai, an Afghan member of parliament and chairman of the internal security committee, commented to the *New York Times*, “It’s a big achievement for the Taliban and shows a big failure and weakness in the government.”

“The Taliban gain two things from this jailbreak,” Hamidzai pointed out. “First, coming after the incidents in Kunduz, Laghman, Kandahar and at the Ministry of Defense headquarters, it sends a message that they can do whatever they want, even at the heart of the most secure and important jail, and it allows them to strengthen their ranks with more manpower.”

In a letter to Karzai, reports Reuters, Afghan justice minister Habibullah Ghaleb, took “a swipe at American security officials helping oversee the jail after taking over from Canadians.” The justice minister pointed out that “US authorities had been busy inside the jail for months building residential rooms and judicial offices, as the tunnel took shape underneath their noses.”

British Foreign Office minister Alistair Burt told parliament Tuesday, “This is a significant event, a disaster in security terms.” Burt asserted that the freed inmates were originally captured “at great cost to all who were involved.”

Canada’s *Globe and Mail* offered some pointed comments.

In an editorial, the newspaper commented that the “audacious liberation” of the political prisoners “is a publicity coup for the Taliban—and a huge blow in morale for the Afghan government—and for NATO troops. It invites doubts about what institutions the Karzai government can run effectively, if it cannot manage a prison. The escape, coming as the spring fighting season begins, will threaten coalition gains made over the winter.”

The *Globe and Mail*’s foreign correspondent Graeme Smith, in a separate comment (“Sarposa jailbreak in Kandahar is a nightmare for NATO”), wrote, “Two uncomfortable lessons could be drawn from the latest Taliban jailbreak in Kandahar: Either the locals were scared to talk about it, or they supported the insurgent plot. Neither option reflects well on NATO strategy in Afghanistan.”

Smith carried on: “How could a team of insurgents camp out in southern Afghanistan’s most heavily guarded city, spend months tunnelling and hauling away tons of earth, and attract no notice? Canada spent millions of dollars upgrading the prison and training its staff; Canadian intelligence agents and commandoes are stationed only three kilometres away, at a camp shared with their U.S. and British counterparts. Why didn’t anybody tip them off?”

Because, the columnist essentially concludes, borrowing the comment of a resident, the local people “are pro-Taliban.” A tribal elder and former member of the provincial council, Haji Mohammed Qassam, explains, “It’s simple. People don’t like the government.” And, he could have added, Afghans also hate the foreign, neo-colonial occupation.

The civilian death count continues to rise in Afghanistan, as the US and NATO allies prosecute their deeply unpopular war. Two Afghan women were killed in an operation in northeastern Afghanistan April 19. A provincial governor said they died in a missile strike in the Dangam district of Kunar Province. The International Security Assistance Force confirmed the deaths of the two women during the US-led military operation.

To date, 1,445 members of the American military have died in Afghanistan since the invasion in October 2001. More than 11,000 US service members have been wounded in hostile action, according to the Defense Department.



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