

Multiple deaths in attack on British Council compound in Kabul

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The compound of the British Council headquarters in the Afghan capital, Kabul, came under a sustained guerrilla attack on Friday, resulting in nine deaths and 22 casualties.

The three-phase assault—raid, bombardment and suicide attack—was a highly organised and sophisticated operation.

At around 5:30 a.m., gunfire rang out in a middle-class residential neighbourhood to the west of the city when the first attackers opened fire on a key police checkpoint guarding an intersection close to the British Council, killing the officers and eliminating security in the immediate vicinity.

Insurgents wearing military-style uniforms began to stream out from side streets that led down from the mountains nearby, firing heavy machine-guns and automatic weapons into the air. Intelligence and police sources later said that some of the insurgents had worn burkas and posed as a family to evade earlier security checkpoints.

At 5:40 a.m. two vehicles heavily laden with explosives detonated in quick succession outside the compound's main gate, killing a number of guards and demolishing a section of the walls and booms that had shielded the buildings.

The blast shook buildings across the city and shattered nearby windows.

A significant amount of explosives were used in the car bomb and intelligence officials have said that the insurgent fighters brought enough weaponry to fight for an entire day, including rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machine-guns and grenades.

The close proximity of the police station meant police were at the scene about 13 minutes later. When they arrived, they discovered their colleagues at the main intersection dead, and began fighting to retake the compound.

Afghan and Nepalese guards fought insurgent fighters until British and New Zealand Special Forces and a squad of Afghan commandos arrived and surrounded the compound.

Amid the gunfire and explosions, low-flying Apache helicopters circled above, firing off flares as a countermeasure against surface to air missiles.

Around midday a pair of Blackhawk helicopters ferried a seriously wounded soldier to a NATO trauma hospital. The New Zealand Defence Force later confirmed that an SAS member had died en route to hospital—the first death the regiment has suffered in Afghanistan—after a bullet is believed to have entered the armpit of his body armour.

It was 2 p.m. before the joint operation by foreign Special Forces, Afghan police and commando unit, as well as hired hands from the British private security firm, G4S, was declared over. All insurgents had either blown themselves up or had been shot and the compound cleared.

According to Afghan intelligence officials, a lone injured gunman managed to hold out in an area protected by armoured doors and glass before he was killed eight hours after the attack began.

G4S said three of its Afghan employees were killed.

This latest attack in the capital carries some significance. The fighting took place in a neighbourhood populated by the Afghan elite, including a vice-president.

The British Council compound, with what has been described as its multimillion-dollar security and precautions, would have been considered one of the most impregnable sites in what was until recent months understood to be the securest place in occupied Afghanistan—Kabul.

The *Guardian* gave this description of the compound:

“With its fortified double set of walls, ‘airlock’ entry system and expensive guards hired from the ranks of retired Gurkhas, the occupants of the British Council

compound in Kabul could be forgiven for feeling at times more like prisoners than teachers and cultural ambassadors. The compound, which in happier times hosted top diplomats and Afghan government ministers for the Queen's official birthday party, typifies how the rise and rise of the Taliban-led insurgency has forced foreign officials to effectively cut themselves off from the country they work in."

British Council teachers and other staff were bundled by private security contractors into a "safe room"—a windowless bunker sealed with a heavy metal door, designed to withstand attack for enough time for outside help to arrive.

Across Kabul, at the British embassy, the ambassador and senior staff scrambled to a control room where they monitored the situation as it unfolded. Staff were later "extracted" and taken to the British Embassy.

The *Guardian* noted that the Afghan commando unit had gained considerable recent experience of sieges and urban insurgent attacks, such as in June during a fight to regain control of the Intercontinental Hotel. But the paper had to concede that "despite being among the best trained members of Afghanistan's security forces it appeared they remain heavily reliant on their foreign mentors, members of New Zealand's Special Air Service."

This is not the first time a high-level attack has been launched on the Independence Day (August 19) public holiday. Intelligence officials revealed later that they had warned the interior ministry and the Kabul police that suicide attackers intended to target the capital. The intelligence suggested that a suicide bomber and at least two vehicles were attempting to make their way from Kabul's western Paghman district to the centre of the city. Police sources later complained that the intelligence had not been specific enough.

Nevertheless, a BBC journalist reported how he had accompanied Kabul's police chief, Gen Ayub Salangi, in the early hours of the morning of the attack as he "crisscrossed the city checking the performance of officers at checkpoints and deploying extra staff, amid intelligence that an attack was imminent in central Kabul."

The reporter said there were reports of an attack on a foreign embassy, before he too left the streets around 2 a.m.

The Taliban said it was a symbolic act timed to coincide with the anniversary of Afghanistan's formal independence from Britain in 1919. "We attacked the buildings because we want to remind the British that we

won our independence from them before and we will do it again," said the statement.

On August 8, 1919, the *Treaty of Rawalpindi* was signed, ending the Third Anglo-Afghan War and granting formal independence on that date. The fighting at the compound raged just a few hundred metres from the grand campus that used to house the British embassy during the height of its empire. The site is now the presidential palace, where the US-puppet President Hamid Karzai and senior Afghan and foreign diplomats marked the anniversary of independence with a small ceremony.

The US/NATO occupation of Afghanistan faces growing resistance. The insurgents are able to carry out ever bolder attacks in the very heart of the heavily fortified capital city. Despite the recent "security handover" marked by ceremonies in various provinces, Afghan police and security forces are not trusted by their foreign trainers and handlers with vital intelligence—or seen as competent to execute counterinsurgency operations even a block away from the main police station in Kabul.

Following the Kabul attack, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the UK's former special envoy to Afghanistan, said claims that Afghan forces would be ready and able to take over responsibility for security after 2014—as planned—had been exposed as a "fantasy." Once international forces withdrew, he warned the country would be plunged into a bloody civil war with rival parties prepared to "fight themselves to a standstill" unless there was a political settlement with the Taliban.

Speaking on the BBC Radio 4 "Today" programme, Cowper-Coles said, "It is a fantasy to imagine that the Afghan security forces are going to be able to secure Afghanistan any time these ten years. They won't be able to secure Afghanistan unless there is a new political and regional settlement."



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