

Failed Assassination Attempt on President Hamid Karzai

Incident

The Afghan President Hamid Karzai came under a deadly terrorist attack by the Afghan Taliban insurgents on 27 April 2008, while commemorating the Mujahideen Day – a national holiday meant to celebrate the withdrawal of former Soviet forces in April 1989 from Afghanistan, after their December 1979 invasion, and their subsequent control of the country for nearly a decade.

The terrorist attack began when the 21-gun salute to President Karzai amid a live band's performance of the national anthem was about to be over. The attackers, holed up in a derelict building, nearly 400 hundred metres away from the Presidential Palace¹, employed small arms and BM-12 rocket shells.²

According to various reports, nearly 11 people suffered serious wounds, including a local Shia cleric and two parliamentarians from the Paktia Province of Afghanistan. Shortly afterwards, the Shia cleric and one parliamentarian died of their wounds. The Shia cleric and the two parliamentarians were seated roughly 65 feet from the place where President Karzai and other foreign dignitaries, such as the ambassadors of US, UK and top military officials of ISAF-NATO were seated.³

As soon as the attack began, security guards whisked away President Karzai and other foreign dignitaries to a safer place. The Afghan security forces were able to surround the Taliban insurgents, and killed three of them while arrested another nine.

Shortly after the attack, the Taliban spokesman issued a statement saying that “three of our attackers have been killed and three managed to escape. Small arms and RPGs were used in the attack.” He further said, “Afghan and NATO authorities this year repeatedly said the Taliban are on the verge of annihilation ... Now it has been proved to them that the Taliban not only have the ability to operate in the provinces, but even in Kabul.”⁴

However, an unknown spokesman of another militant group led by Afghan war veteran, Gulbadin Hikmatyar, Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) said it was their volunteers who attacked the president. He said their men used a house for several days and the attack on Afghan president and his cabinet colleagues was pre-planned.⁵

¹ ‘Three Killed as Karzai Escapes Deadly Parade Attack’, *The News*, 28 April 2008

² ‘President Karzai Escapes Assassination Bid, Three Killed’, 27 April 2007, <http://afgha.com/?q=node/7282>

³ Ibid.

⁴ ‘Karzai Escapes Assassination Bid’, *Daily Times*, 28 April 2008

⁵ ‘Afghanistan President Escapes 4th Assassination Attempt’, 27 April 2008, http://english.ohmynews.com/ArticleView/article_view.asp?menu=A11100&no=382428&rel_no=1&back_url=

Eye Witnesses

According to the British Ambassador, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, he was standing on the front row of the dais alongside the United States envoy to Kabul, “It was coming to the end of the 21-gun salute. I saw an explosion and a puff of dust to the left of the parade and then heard the crackle of small arms fire from all directions ... After some hesitation, my bodyguard frog-marched me away.”⁶

A police officer at the scene said he saw two persons firing AK-47 assault rifles from a house opposite where Karzai was sitting.⁷ UN spokesman Aleem Siddique cited a UN diplomat at the scene as saying that between three and five people opened up with small-arms fire toward the dignitaries.⁸

According to Mohammad Saleh Saljoqi, a lawmaker at the ceremony, two rockets landed near the dignitaries, and that there was continuous AK-47 fire.⁹ An anonymous Afghan intelligence official said that authorities have rounded up about 100 people for questioning from the area where the gunfire originated.¹⁰

Another eyewitness, Ahmad Naweed, said the Taliban gunmen were firing from a third-floor room of a three-story hotel, 500 yards from the parade ground. The police quickly surrounded the hotel and fired at a window covered by plastic sheeting instead of glass.¹¹

There seems to be massive security lapse in the way the security arrangements were handled. The fact that the militants were able to get so close to the place of event, and fire at the ceremony speaks amply of this incompetence on the part of the Afghan security forces. Also, the militants were able to bring in small and medium weaponry, such as RPGs etc that speaks of serious lapses in security arrangement. The fact that the militants chose a site to effectively target the place and kill and wound 11 Afghans, including two lawmakers sitting close to the Afghan President means that the militants had conducted surveillance of the area and had planned the attack well before time.

These shortcomings in security arrangement were highlighted by a senior Afghan lawmaker, Noorul-Haq Uloomi, who said that the “full responsibility goes to the security ministries.” He also hinted on the poor training being imparted to the Afghan security forces, saying, “It is because they always think about the quantity, and not the quality, of the forces.”¹²

On the issue of how the militants had managed to bring weapons so close to the parade ground, the Taliban also claimed to have received help from within the government

⁶ ‘Karzai Escapes Assassination Bid’, *Daily Times*, 28 April 2008

⁷ ‘Karzai Survives Assassination Attempt’, *Taipai Times*, 28 April 2008

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ ‘Karzai Escapes Attack in Kabul by Gunmen’, *The New York Times*, 28 April 2008

¹² *Ibid.*

forces.¹³ A military officer at the scene was also overheard reporting the incident on a telephone and said that 12 men had gathered at a restaurant near the parade ground before the attack and had stashed automatic rifles and mortars there.¹⁴

This was the fourth assassination attempt on President Karzai since he assumed office following the overthrow of the Taliban regime in November 2001 in Afghanistan. The first attack on President Karzai was conducted on 5 September 2002 when a Taliban insurgent clad in military uniform fired into Karzai's vehicle from close range, injuring the accompanying Governor of Kandahar and a bodyguard.¹⁵ Two years later, the Taliban insurgents fired a rocket at a helicopter on 16 September 2004 that was carrying President Karzai to Gardez, the capital of Afghanistan's southeastern Paktia province. Another attempt on his life was carried out in the Ghazni province, located some 120 kilometers south of the central capital Kabul on 10 June 2007. In the assassination attack, several rockets landed close to the place where Karzai was delivering a speech to elders and students in Ander district in Ghazni province.

Military parades are often locations for attempted assassinations.. Former president of Egypt, Anwar El Sadat, was assassinated in October 1981 during the annual 6th October Victory Parade in Cairo. Similarly, the former pro-Moscow Chechen president, Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov was killed in Dynamo Stadium in May 2004 in a bomb explosion while witnessing the annual Victory Day parade celebrating the former Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945.

The attack also signifies that the Taliban insurgents are planning to intensify their attacks on Kabul this year. According to various reports, the Taliban Spring Offence 2008 aims at intensifying attacks on Kabul to worsen the security situation and forcing foreign nationals and donor agencies to flee the country. The terrorist attacks could be symbolic to highlight the deadly nature of the insurgency. For example, the January 2007 attack on Serena Hotel in Kabul was aimed at pointing towards the insecurity that surrounds the entire country, including its capital Kabul. To accomplish this task, the Taliban militants aim to create a ring of Taliban pockets around Kabul to attack it from all the sides. In 2007, the Taliban attempted to establish strongholds in the Tazaab and Mussayab valley near Kabul, but this Taliban strategy was successfully thwarted by the Afghan and international security forces. This year, the Taliban may try once more to get control of the two valleys, and the support from Pakistani Taliban militants based in Bajaur and Mohmand Agencies of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) could be crucial in this respect.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 'Karzai Survives Attempt on His Life', *BBC*, 5 September 2002



KABUL: Afghan soldiers scurry for cover after an attack by the Taliban during the annual military parade on Sunday.—AP

Courtesy: Dawn, 28 April 2008



Courtesy: The Washington Post, 28 April 2008