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Attack in Kabul points to shifting Taliban tactics

Coordinated bombings that kill 16 in a rich residential district come early Friday as the Afghan weekend begins, helping the assailants set up the attack, while cutting the risk of civilian deaths.

By Mark Magnier and Aimal Yaqubi

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Reporting from Kabul, Afghanistan, and New Delhi

A coordinated attack early Friday, which killed at least 16 people and targeted a hotel and guesthouse in central Kabul, underscored the shifting tactics of Taliban insurgents and their keen understanding of geopolitical implications.

Three assailants struck at 6:30 a.m. on the first day of the Afghan weekend, when few people are on the street, in the prosperous Shahr-e-Naw residential area. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the bombings, the first attack in Kabul since January and the capital's deadliest in months, police and Interior Ministry officials said.

The destruction started with a car bombing that leveled the Arya Guesthouse, which was filled with Indian doctors who work at Kabul's Indira Gandhi Child Health Institute, city Police Chief Abdul Rahman Rahman told reporters.

After the blast, one of the militants set off his explosives vest in front of the ruins while the two others entered the Park Residence guesthouse across the street, which was soon surrounded by police and military. A second assailant then blew himself up, killing three policemen, while the third attacker hunkered down in the basement and was killed about 10:30 a.m. by police gunfire.

Among the dead were six Indians, four Afghan civilians, an Italian diplomat, a French filmmaker and three police officers, officials said. Some bodies were so badly burned it will take time to identify them. At least 36 people were wounded.

"I was in my room and heard a big explosion, and all the glass shattered, the first of three blasts," said Qimat Shah, 38, a municipal worker living in the area. "My head was injured, bleeding badly, from the flying glass."

Early morning television broadcast images of a plume of black smoke rising from the area, shattered glass lining the streets and broken windows in shops and homes. Afghan police crouched behind traffic barriers as the remaining gunman remained holed up in the guesthouse basement.

Analysts said the attack appeared to be a well-planned operation aimed at achieving several political objectives.



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Pulling off the attack in central Kabul -- in one of the most secure neighborhoods in Afghanistan's most secure city -- was designed to send a message that the Taliban is not intimidated by the stepped-up military offensive in the southern city of Marja and can bring the battle to the doorstep of its adversaries.

"They're trying to up the pressure and send a message that you guys aren't defeating us," said John Harrison, a research manager at the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore. "And they're showing they can penetrate the city and stand awhile."

The early morning timing on a weekend probably made it easier to get the attackers, vehicles, weapons and explosives into position since security forces presumably would be less vigilant; an early start also gives recruits less time for second thoughts. And with streets largely deserted, the attackers are less likely to kill civilians and more likely to find their principal target -- foreigners -- still sleeping. The insurgent group is wary of a backlash from the Afghan public over civilian deaths.

As suicide bombings have become nearly routine, the combination of a car bombing and suicide blast followed by an armed standoff carries more shock value, providing more of the attention that militants seek. Having armed insurgents stand their ground also sends a message that the fighters are more ideologically committed than some drugged, brainwashed, poorly educated teenager pulling a detonation cord. The combination, with its drawn-out suspense, also gains better TV coverage.

"It prolongs developments, adds to the chaos and brings more publicity," said Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, senior researcher at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. "With a suicide attack, you blow yourself up, that's it. This has much more impact."

The choice of the Shahr-e-Naw neighborhood frequented by foreigners and affluent Afghans sent a not-so-subtle message: foreign occupiers and those who follow their profligate ways must be eliminated.

And that the militants targeted a guesthouse serving Indians is probably no accident, analysts said. At one level, the attack is a direct challenge to President Hamid Karzai, who has closely allied himself with India and whom the Taliban opposes for his pro-Western policies and support.

The attack is also a bid to further drive a wedge among Western coalition member countries in the hopes that other nations will follow the Dutch in leaving, as they appear likely to do with the recent fall of their government.

Targeting Indians working on humanitarian projects -- coming on the heels of two attacks on the Indian Embassy in Kabul in the last two years -- also may serve the interests of some in Pakistan who hope to reduce India's influence in Afghanistan as the region prepares for the likely power vacuum after the U.S.-led coalition leaves.

Pakistan's intelligence agencies have a history of supporting militant groups in Pakistan, many with links to their Afghan counterparts, as part of their proxy war against India, according to U.S. and Asian analysts.

"Pakistan is deeply resentful of India's footprint in Afghanistan and would like to see it reduced," said Sadanand Dhume, an Asia Society fellow and author of "My Friend the Fanatic," a book on radical Islam.

"That said, I don't see India [abandoning projects in Afghanistan] over one attack. It's deeply committed to maintaining a role in Afghanistan."

If tensions rise again between India and Pakistan just as the two have resumed formal talks after a 15-month hiatus following the 2008 Mumbai attack, it could keep more Pakistani troops on the Indian border and away from the Afghan border, where the U.S. would like to see them. The Afghan and Pakistani Taliban could gain more freedom to operate along the porous border.

"If you get India riled up, you divert Pakistan troops," Harrison said. "The jihadi community is trying to relieve the pressure."

Finally, there's the spin that militants put on the attack.

Analysts said that when Afghan police respond to an attack, the Taliban spreads rumors that foreigners are putting Afghans in danger while avoiding it themselves. If coalition troops respond to an attack, the Taliban spreads rumors that the coalition doesn't trust locals and views them as lap dogs.

"No matter what the coalition does, it can't win," Harrison said. "It's a very smart strategy."

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