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Taliban Continue Attacks in Kabul

The Middle East-based al Jazeera news network reported on January 20 that Yemeni fighter jets have conducted an attack against the home of Ayed al-Shabwani a suspected al-Qaeda leader. The raids took place in Erq al Shabwan village in Maarib province, about 80 miles east of Yemen's capital, Sanaa.

The report cited authorities who said that Taliban militants armed with automatic weapons and wearing suicide vests attacked several heavily guarded official buildings in the center of Kabul. The insurgents apparently planned to seize key government ministries and to storm the presidential palace. Senior Afghan officials reported that the militants's plan failed because security personnel deployed in the area instantly identified and killed one of the suicide bombers, causing the rest of the attackers to take shelter in a nearby shopping center.



Afghanistan's intelligence service chief Amrullah Saleh told reporters at a news conference that seven armed men took part in the attack and all of them were killed by the Afghan security forces. Saleh praised security forces, stating:

By sacrificing their lives, our fallen colleagues and those who bravely stood against these terrorists and sustained injuries, they managed to save lives of ... [Afghan] civilians. Today's attack was in no way a success for the enemy. They cannot claim credit for entering into a shopping mall and just blindly shooting at the civilians.

Saleh would not comment on reports that the attackers had come from Pakistan. According to VOA, U.S and Afghan officials believe the Haqqani network of Afghan militants has set up bases in the tribal region of Northwest Pakistan to train and launch such cross-border suicide missions. "We do not want to speculate," Saleh said. "Once we are able to show you the evidence of who they were and where they were trained and what they were planning. What I promise to you, like other incidents in the past, we will produce you soon the evidence and most likely the remaining part of the cell and you will see who they are."

In a separate report VOA also quoted the reaction of the U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, who spoke to reporters in New Delhi, India, while attending a strategic planning session with Indian government officials in preparation for an upcoming international conference on Afghanistan. "It's not surprising that the Taliban do this sort of thing. They're desperate people, they're ruthless," said Holbrooke. "The people who are doing this certainly will not survive the attack. Nor will they succeed." ?



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Holbrooke anticipated that similar attacks would follow. "We can expect this sort of thing on a regular basis. That is who the Taliban are," he said. "They're part of a set of extremist groups operating in the border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan and they do these sort of desperate things all the time."

U.S. General Anne Macdonald, who works closely with the Afghan interior ministry, told the Middle East-based Al Jazeera network that the Afghan national security forces "responded very well" to the attacks. "They [security forces] were able to contain the situation within five hours," she said. "The damage could have been much worse — to individuals and to property. They have a long way to go but they are interested and motivated. They want to serve the people of Afghanistan."

Al Jazeera also quoted Farouq Bashar, from Kabul university, who said that "normal business" had resumed on the streets of Kabul. "People are still a little bit panicked. They are trying to stay away from fortified areas, afraid of another attack," said Bashar. "The Taliban spokesman said they dispatched 20 suicide bombers to Kabul and only seven of them were killed. We don't know if the other 13 are alive, or where they are."

The attacks came as Afghan President Hamid Karzai was swearing in new members of his cabinet at the presidential palace. Karzai has proposed a plan to offer economic incentives to Afghan fighters who may have joined the Taliban purely for monetary reasons to disarm and become law-abiding members of Afghan society, and the attacks might be seen as a "spoiler" to any such plan.

During a flight to India to attend the conference with special envoy Holbrooke, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told members of the press that it was unlikely that ideology-motivated Taliban leaders — including Mullah Muhammad Omar — would reconcile with Afghanistan's government, but that lower-ranking members whose motivation is money rather than ideology might be open to a peaceful settlement.

"I'd be very surprised to see a reconciliation with Mullah Omar," Gates told reporters. "And I think our view that, until the Taliban leadership sees a change in the momentum and begins to see that they are not going to win, that the likelihood of significant reconciliation at senior levels is not terribly great."

An assessment of the Kabul attacks given to Reuters news by Abdul Halim Achakzai at the Kabul-based Center for Conflict and Peace Studies was: "The attack was both a success and a failure for the Taliban. It was a psychological success but a failure in that they weren't able to cause a lot of casualties to Afghan security forces."

"They just want to show their power, it was an 'attack show' from the Taliban, not a military-based action. I think there was not a military goal," Wahid Mudjah, a Kabul-based writer and political analyst, told Reuters. "They just wanted a show for the international community."

As the Afghan government continues to sort out which Taliban militants are ideologically motivated and unwilling to make a deal, and which are basically mercenaries who can be bought off, the fighting continues and U.S. military personnel continue to die. It makes it increasingly harder for our government to justify our endless expenditure of blood and money, with neither a clear objective nor the attainment of any possible objective likely.

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