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Rival Ethnic Groups Clash On Streets of Afghan Capital

By Nathan Hodge and Ziaulhaq Sultani

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KABUL—A minor traffic incident in Kabul this weekend escalated into a deadly gunbattle between rival ethnic groups that threatened to rekindle civil-war tensions and marred a major government celebration.

Saturday's fighting pitted ethnic Tajiks from the Panjshir province north of Kabul against ethnic Hazaras, who were on opposing sides of the civil war that leveled much of the capital after the Communist regime collapsed in 1992.

The confrontation occurred during a national holiday to commemorate Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Tajik commander from Panjshir who was assassinated by al Qaeda suicide bombers in 2001. While Mr. Massoud is officially revered as a national hero in Afghanistan, with his portraits bedecking government buildings and the Kabul airport, many Hazaras still harbor bitter memories of a violent offensive against western Kabul by his forces in 1993.

Witnesses in western Kabul said Saturday's fighting erupted after a caravan of Panjshiri vehicles struck down a bicyclist in the largely Hazara neighborhood of Pol-e Sokhta. Supporters of Mr. Massoud convoyed through the Afghan capital in vehicles decorated with posters of their deceased leader, something some Hazaras said they considered a provocative act in their

neighborhood.

Ethnic violence in Kabul is unusual, especially considering that the Tajik and Hazara minorities both face a common enemy—the Taliban, a movement representing mostly the country's largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns. For many in Kabul, this outbreak reinforced fears that such ethnic tensions might spiral out of control after most international forces withdraw in 2014, just as it happened after the Soviet withdrawal.

Patricia Gossman, an independent analyst with long experience in Afghanistan, said the civil war has become "the elephant in the room" as foreign forces go home. "This is the undercurrent right now below everything going on in Afghanistan: The fear of a return to that kind of ethnically based divisions and rivalry," she said.

Afghan leaders quickly stepped in to quell the tensions after Saturday's clash. Ahmad Zia Massoud, the brother of the late Tajik commander and Afghanistan's former vice president, issued a statement decrying the behavior of some of the participants in the commemoration.

"Regretfully, a number of people...misused the name of the national hero and were cherishing his martyrdom by fixing his pictures in their vehicles and creating uproar in the city," he said. "Those people did an obscene act that resulted in a battle between two brotherly tribes with the same destiny."

Leading Hazara politician Hajji Mohammad Mohaqiq, a former warlord who now sits in the Afghan parliament, also called for calm as he spoke at the funerals of the Hazara victims of Saturday's clash.

Mohammad Agha, a Hazara cook in western Kabul, said his 18-year-old brother was struck and seriously injured by one of the vehicles driven by Mr. Massoud's supporters. When the police failed to detain the Panjshiris, a bloody confrontation ensued between the Hazaras and Afghan police, he said.

"The police did not stop them and let them go, so then a huge number of Hazara people gathered in the square and rushed towards the police check posts," Mr. Agha said.

Enraged demonstrators subsequently torched four police outposts, eyewitnesses said. Evidence of the violence was still visible Sunday around Mazari square, the traffic circle where the hourslong exchange of gunfire took place. The burned-out checkpoints—built from old shipping containers—were still on the square.

"One of our guys was killed here," said a police officer manning one checkpoint, who asked that his name not be used. "Another one was injured and went to the hospital, we were told he also died."

Several witnesses said police opened fire on the crowd, but the final casualty toll was unclear as of Sunday evening. Kabul's chief of police, when asked for comment on the issue, repeatedly hung up on a Wall Street Journal reporter. Other Afghan officials played down the violence, with

a spokesman for the Afghan interior ministry dismissing the incident as a local "quarrel." Hazara residents put their death toll at five or six.

Several hospitals in the area reported treating patients for gunshot wounds. Dr. Yunas Haideri, a doctor at the Hakim Nasir Khusrow hospital, said the small private hospital treated six people for wounds. Employees of Watan hospital, a nearby clinic, said they received six patients with gunshot wounds, as well as one fatality.

The fighting in Kabul occurred on the same day that suicide attacker detonated explosives near the heavily fortified headquarters of the U.S.-led coalition in Kabul, killing six people, most of them children. The Taliban said the attack was in response to the Obama administration designating the Haqqani network, an affiliated insurgent group, as a terrorist organization.

While Afghan and coalition officials said the suicide bomber was a teenage child himself, the Taliban denied this account, saying he was a 28-year-old from Logar province.