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Kabul strike hits peace plan hard

By Jean MacKenzie

1/20/2010

KABUL - Monday's Taliban attack in the Afghan capital, Kabul, comes as President Hamid Karzai is trying to win over the international community to the idea of reconciliation with the Taliban.

He has called repeatedly for peace overtures to the insurgents, and has even broached the subject of removing Taliban leaders from the United Nations' "black list" which restricts extremists' movements and freezes their assets.

He was due to unveil his proposals at a London conference scheduled for January 28. But with the Taliban so publicly and dramatically signaling their willingness to continue the conflict, peace talks may now be off the table for some time to come.

Kabul was quiet but uneasy late on Monday following a series of attacks on the city center, which came amid unusually tight security around the city.

Beginning at a little after 9.30 am local time, Kabul was rocked by explosions. Small arms fire could be heard as police responded to coordinated assaults on the ministries of Justice, Finance, Defense and Mines and Industries.

For the next three hours the city was in a panic. Plumes of black smoke could be seen over Pashtunistan Square, and there were media reports that several buildings were on fire, the presidential palace was under attack, and even that the central bank had been overrun.

A Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mojahed, warned that 20 suicide bombers were roaming the city, and that the insurgents were prepared to fight to the death.

Banks and stores were closed; embassies locked their doors too. The city came to an almost complete standstill.

By 1.00 pm it was all over. Afghan police had managed to re-establish control and the capital slowly began to pick up the pieces.

The attack left 15 people dead, including 10 insurgents, and over 60 injured.

An explosives-packed ambulance detonated in front of a shopping center close to the Defense Ministry and the Serena Hotel came under attack for the third time in two years, as grenades landed in the garden.

The attacks are the largest to date in Kabul, which has witnessed a number of insurgent operations over the past 13 months.

In February 2009, a similar series of assaults left 20 dead in Kabul; in October, the storming of a United Nations guesthouse killed six and resulted in the UN sending most of its staff out of Afghanistan.

Suicide bombings, once a rarity in the capital, are now almost a weekly occurrence.

While an Interior Ministry spokesman, Zmarai Bashari, sought to portray the January 18 attacks as a sign of Taliban weakness, it clearly represents just the opposite. For years the insurgents had been denied access to the capital, with frequent checkpoints and vehicle searches at all approaches to the city.

The attacks may not have been a complete surprise, say residents. For the past five or six days, security has been unusually tight, with police at virtually every intersection stopping cars and searching any suspicious vehicles.

Kabul residents, used to unpredictability and violence, seemed to shrug off the incident. They appeared more annoyed by the inconvenience caused by the closure of shops than anything else.

"I need to get money," fumed one young resident standing outside the locked grille of AIB Bank, in central Kabul.

They were nevertheless surprised at the scale and complexity of the attacks.

"This has been a very dangerous day," said Zabiullah, who works as a guard in western Kabul.