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European Languages

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The New York Times

## Kabul Attack Shows Resilience of Afghan Militants

By DEXTER FILKINS

1/19/2010

KABUL, Afghanistan — A team of militants launched a spectacular assault at the heart of the Afghan government on Monday, with two men detonating suicide bombs and the rest fighting to the death only 50 yards from the gates of the presidential palace.

The attack paralyzed the city for hours, as hundreds of Afghan commandos converged and opened fire. The battle unfolded in the middle of Pashtunistan Square, a traffic circle where the palace of President [Hamid Karzai](#), the Ministry of Justice and the Central Bank, the target of the attack, are located.

As the gun battle raged, another suicide bomber, this one driving an ambulance, struck a traffic circle a half-mile away, sending a second mass of bystanders fleeing in terror. Afghan officials said that three soldiers and two civilians — including a child — were killed, and at least 71 people were wounded.

The assault was the latest in a series of audacious operations by insurgents meant to shatter the calm of the Afghan capital. The [Taliban](#) are a mostly rural phenomenon in a mostly rural country; the overwhelming majority of United States troops are deployed in small outposts in the countryside. On most days, the war does not reach the urban centers.

But increasingly the Taliban are bringing the fight into the cities, further demoralizing Afghans and lending to the impression that virtually no part of the country is safe from the group's penetration.

The Monday attack seemed intended to strike fear into the usually quiet precincts of downtown Kabul — and to drive home the ease with which insurgents could strike the United States-backed government here.

In that way the assault succeeded without question. Five hours after the attack began, gunfire was still echoing through the downtown as commandos searched for holdouts in a nearby office building. The Faroshga market, one of the city's most popular shopping malls and a place where some militants holed up, lay in ruins, shattered and burning and belching black smoke.

The seven militants who carried out the attack died; five were gunned down and two killed themselves. The corpses of two of the militants lay splayed under blankets, their heads and bodies riddled with bullets and smashed.

The streets of Kabul emptied. Merchants closed their shops, and Afghans ran from their offices. Even guards assigned to Mr. Karzai came to join the fighting; it was that close.

“All of a sudden three men came in wrapped in shawls — and then they pulled them off and we could see their guns and grenades,” said an Afghan man who witnessed the attack and who had been in the market. “They told us to get out, and then they went to the roof and started firing.”

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack. Reached by telephone, a spokesman said the group had sent 20 suicide bombers for the operation. That was an exaggeration.

“Some of our suicide bombers have blown themselves up, bringing heavy casualties to government officials,” said Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesman.

At the height of the battle, women and men, some of them clutching babies, ran down the streets, some bleeding, some sobbing. Even a stray dog, frightened by one of the blasts, dashed wildly down a street.

A second Taliban representative, also reached by telephone, said the attack was intended to answer American and Afghan proposals to “reconcile” with and “reintegrate” Taliban fighters into mainstream society. The plan is a central part of the United States-backed campaign to turn the tide of the war, and it will be showcased this month at an international conference in London.

“We are ready to fight, and we have the strength to fight, and nobody from the Taliban side is ready to make any kind of deal,” Mr. Mujahid said.

The style of the Monday attack has become increasingly familiar. In October, militants wearing suicide belts [attacked a United Nations guesthouse](#) in Kabul and killed eight people, including five of the organization’s workers. In December, a suicide car bomber [struck the Heetal Hotel](#), killing eight people and wounding 48.

The prototype of Monday’s operation was [the assault on the Ministry of Justice](#), which a team of guerrillas, including suicide bombers, stormed last February. The militants killed the guards, got inside and stalked the halls for victims. At least 10 people died, not including the militants, whose bodies the police dumped in the streets.

That is what the militants clearly intended Monday. The attack began at 9:30 a.m., when the streets of downtown Kabul were jammed with traffic. A man wearing a suicide belt approached the gates of the Central Bank, which regulates the flow of currency in the country, and tried to push past the guards. The guards shot him, but not before the bomber managed to detonate his explosives in the street.

The other militants, who were apparently intending to follow the suicide bomber into the bank, took cover in the Faroshga market, a five-story building next door. They expelled the shoppers and shopkeepers, ran to the higher floors, and began shooting. Other fighters slipped into the Ministry of Justice and the Ariana theater, the police said, but a survey of both sites revealed no evidence of that.

Within minutes, hundreds of Afghan commandos, soldiers and police officers surrounded Pashtunistan Square and attacked. Some of the Afghan fighters were part of specially formed antiterrorism squads. Monday’s gun battle was notable for the absence of United States soldiers: a small group of commandos from New Zealand were the only Western soldiers on the scene.

One group of Afghan commandos said they had come straight from a training class.

“We were going through drills when we got the word,” said Bawahuddin, a young member of an antiterrorism squad, standing behind a wall as he prepared to join the fight. Bawahuddin flashed a thumbs-up sign. “We’re ready — we’re ready.”

And then his unit got the word — “Go now, go now!” — and the men began to run. Bawahuddin’s eyes flashed with fear.

“Either we are going to kill them, or they are going to kill us,” said Saifullah Sarhadi, a commando on the edge of the fight.

Bullets flew in every direction, thousands of them. The militants, holed up on the upper floors of the market, fired and fought as their building exploded and burned. A blast sounded, and then another — the sounds of heavy guns firing inside.

With the battle raging, a shock wave rippled from another part of town — a suicide car bomber. His van, complete with a siren and light, was marked Maiwand Hospital on its sides and front, so the police let it through. It exploded in Malik Asghar Square, creating a crater in the street and shaking the ground for a mile.

Afterward, the remains of the ambulance lay in the road, its twisted shards still smoking. Police officers pulled out the pieces of a man — dark skinned and heavy set. An Arab, they said. But no one seemed to know for sure.