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Taliban strike at Kandahar police headquarters, killing 19

By Laura King

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The attack by Taliban gunmen and bombers kills policemen, soldiers and civilians while leaving 49 injured. The raid demonstrates a continued ability by insurgents to mount complex assaults in the key Afghanistan city despite a NATO offensive there.

Reporting from Kabul, Afghanistan — A team of Taliban gunmen and bombers launched a brazen strike Saturday on the provincial police headquarters in the southern city of Kandahar, killing at least 19 people, injuring scores of others and demonstrating a continued ability to mount complex attacks in a metropolis that has been a principal focus of Western military efforts over the last year.

The chaotic battle killed at least 15 Afghan policemen, two Afghan army soldiers and two civilians, Kandahar's governor, Toryalai Wesa, told reporters. Civilians, including nine children, made up nearly half of the 49 injured. Four of the assailants were killed and one was captured, Wesa said.

The attack, which began at noon, paralyzed Afghanistan's second-largest city for hours. Automatic weapons fire and explosions echoed through the dusty streets. Shopkeepers and passers-by scrambled for cover as helicopters circled overhead.

The onslaught began when the assailants, some said to be wearing police uniforms, stormed a complex containing a hotel, shops and a wedding hall directly in front the police headquarters, then used it as the springboard for their assault. That part of the city is heavily fortified; the governor's office and several other sensitive installations are nearby.

Officials said the attackers were armed with AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars and explosive vests. One suicide bomber was reported to have blown himself up in the wedding hall, and at least two car bombs went off during the attack, according to the governor.

Taliban leaders have vowed to keep a grip on Kandahar, the movement's spiritual home. Before the winter set in, NATO forces seized several key districts surrounding the city and mounted a relentless series of targeted strikes against midlevel Taliban leaders, painting the campaign as a major success.

The blows undoubtedly weakened the insurgency, but a sense of insecurity still stalks the city. Western commanders acknowledge it will not be clear until the onset of the spring "fighting season" whether the setbacks to the Taliban were lasting ones. Fighters generally winter in havens in Pakistan and return when weather conditions improve.

In the meantime, the insurgents have terrorized Kandaharis with a string of assassinations of tribal elders and senior officials. The province's deputy governor was killed by a suicide bomber last month as he drove to work.

A Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousaf Ahmadi, claimed responsibility for Saturday's siege, boasting of the heavy casualties. President Hamid Karzai and the NATO force condemned the attack.

NATO maintains one of its largest bases on Kandahar's outskirts, and a contingent of U.S. forces uses the police headquarters as a base. Western military officials confirmed that NATO troops were involved in the fighting, but did not immediately provide details or disclose any casualties.