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## Suicide bomber kills 4 at Karzai memorial service

By Joshua Partlow and Kevin Sieff

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After the last prayer of the Thursday morning memorial service for President Hamid Karzai's slain half-brother, a senior cleric inside Kandahar's Red Mosque announced that lunch would soon be served.

For the distinguished guests clustered on the side of the vast carpeted prayer hall — including Kandahar's governor and four of Karzai's brothers — a meal was ready across town at Mandigak palace, where the provincial council meets, the cleric said.

The others could eat in the mosque, served by the boys scattered around the room.

As the guests stood to leave, a bomb hidden inside a man's turban detonated, killing at least four people and wounding 15 others, according to Afghan officials and witnesses.

The attack defied stringent security measures — checkpoints and road blocks surrounded the mosque, and some guests said they were searched three times before entering — that were put in place after Ahmed Wali Karzai was shot dead at his home by a trusted confidant on Tuesday.

People who attended the service noted that turbans, which are common in Afghanistan, are generally not part of a body search.

None of the Karzai family members died in Thursday's blast. But by penetrating the high-profile event, the killer proved again the vulnerability of Afghan officials as the United States works to transfer security responsibilities to Afghan security forces, and demonstrated the intensity of the campaign to take out Karzai government loyalists.

When the bomb went off, “everyone was quiet for a second,” said Gul Mohammad, 40, a driver who attended the service. “Then everyone panicked.”

Guests quickly formed a circle around the Karzai family and hustled them from the mosque unharmed, witnesses said, while the dead and injured lay bleeding and burned in the smoky room.

“It was a very, very, very close call,” said Mahmood Karzai, one of the president’s brothers, who estimated he was about 20 feet from the bomber. “The guy didn’t recognize us. It was a miracle we got out of there alive.” Other witnesses said there was a somewhat greater distance between the bomber and the area where the Karzai family and other high-level dignitaries were seated--perhaps 40 yards.

Among the dead was the chief cleric of Kandahar, Mawlawi Hekmatullah, officials said. All of the cabinet ministers and senior officials who had traveled from Kabul for the event survived.

“We are boarding a plane now and all of the ministers and deputy ministers escaped unhurt,” said Nasrullah Stanekzai, a legal adviser for the president.

Hundreds of guests were preparing to leave at the time of the explosion, said Haji Dil Jan, a border police commander from Herat who attended the service and whose 21-year-old son’s face was burned in the blast.

“Everyone panicked, everyone just wanted to save themselves and run,” Jan said at Mirwais Regional Hospital, where he was tending to his son. “I don’t know how the bomber was able to get in. I don’t understand.”

After the explosion shook the room, “I saw a lot of dead and wounded bodies,” said Abdul Qadir Noorzai, the head of the Kandahar office of the Afghan Independent Human Rights commission. Two of his nephews, including one who was a brother-in-law of Ahmed Wali Karzai, were hospitalized for their injuries.

“Our concerns and our worries are growing day by day about attending these types of ceremonies,” Noorzai said.

Mahmood Karzai laid the blame for the attack on Pakistan, where many Taliban leaders reside. “How long are we going to pretend, Afghans and Americans? Why is there so much patience with Pakistan? Are they so powerful?”

President Karzai, who attended his half-brother’s funeral on Wednesday but was not at the memorial service, said the bombing “was entirely an act contrary to Islam and humanity, which has no justification in any religion or sect.”

Also on Thursday, the United Nations reported that civilian deaths in Afghanistan increased by 15 percent in the first six months of 2011 over the same period last year, even as attacks on NATO and Afghan forces began to decline.

The bulk of the 1,462 deaths during the period were caused by landmine-like improvised explosive devices planted by the Taliban, according to the U.N. report. May and June were the two deadliest months for civilians since the organization began keeping count in 2007.

“Afghan children, women and men continue to be killed at an alarming rate,” said Staffan de Mistura, special representative for the secretary general.

Gen. David Petraeus, the top U.S. military commander in Afghanistan, said last week that the number of insurgent attacks on NATO and Afghan forces declined in May and June by “a few percent,” compared with the same months in 2010.

The disparity between the NATO and U.N. data — attacks on military personnel declining while civilian deaths spike — gets at the challenge of gauging the success of the American-led effort in Afghanistan. Even if the Taliban’s capacity to wage war on coalition forces is waning, that says little about the group’s ability to terrorize local populations, officials said.

The increasingly deadly roadside bombs “are meant to hit tanks, but they’re triggered mostly by minibuses, cars or civilians walking,” de Mistura said Thursday.

U.N. officials recognized recent NATO efforts to avoid civilian casualties, pointing to the decrease in the total number of civilians killed by the coalition. At the same time, the number killed specifically by NATO airstrikes, which are hugely controversial in Afghanistan, spiked 14 percent.

The report places most responsibility for civilian casualties on the Taliban, which it says was responsible for about 80 percent of the civilian deaths.

“More than a report, this is an appeal,” de Mistura said. He said that the report’s authors had contacted Taliban representatives, who disputed the U.N.’s claims.

Special correspondents Sayed Salahuddin in Kabul and Javed Hamdard in Kandahar contributed to this report.