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Taliban attacks in Afghanistan show growing sophistication

By Dion Nissenbaum
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The attack this week on a major Afghan police base in Kandahar that killed nine — including three American soldiers — was the best planned and most advanced that U.S. soldiers who fought it off have seen in the past year, U.S. military officials said Thursday.

"It was definitely well-planned and co-ordinated much better than anything we've seen before," said Capt. Steven J. Davis, 26, of Lansing, Mich., as U.S. and Afghan forces worked to repair the damage. His unit, the 82nd Airborne's 508 Parachute Infantry Regiment, based at Fort Bragg, N.C., arrived about a year ago.

The assault began Tuesday night when at least three attackers blew up the rear wall of the elite police compound in a Taliban-saturated part of Kandahar. Although it was initially thought to be a car bomb, Davis said explosives planted alongside the compound wall caused the first blast.

As Afghan and American forces inside the base rushed to fend off the attack, Taliban fighters fired rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns during a half-hour battle that killed three American soldiers, one Afghan police officer and five Afghans working with the U.S.-led coalition forces, NATO officials said.

The assault — which involved at least three Taliban suicide bombers — was the latest in a series of well-planned Taliban strikes that are forcing American and Afghan forces to adapt.

In the past two months, Taliban fighters have used similar tactics to hit major coalition military bases in Kandahar, Bagram and Jalalabad.

"Obviously we are going towards these fairly sophisticated complex attacks," said Sami Kovanen, senior information analyst for Indicium Consulting, a Kabul-based research firm that analyzes trends in the Afghan war.

Tuesday's target was a burgeoning base housing members of the Afghan National Civil Order Police, an elite unit dispatched to Kandahar to set up a new ring of checkpoints around Kandahar city.

The checkpoints had been operating about two weeks when the Taliban hit the central command base.

"It's very difficult, unless you are on an island, to lock down a city," Davis said. "What we've done is take away their main routes of entry and forced them into more open areas. I wouldn't say that we're going to eradicate all enemy presence in Kandahar city, but the SRPF (security ring protection force) is providing an immediate and lasting increase to security here."

Davis praised the elite Afghan force for responding quickly to the attack and coordinating with American forces to fend off the persistent Taliban assault.

As the summer unfolds, battles in and around Kandahar are expected to escalate. U.S.-led forces are gradually clamping down on Taliban-controlled areas as they try to support American-backed Afghan politicians.

Senator Carl Levin, D-Mich., the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said Wednesday that the operation to clear the area of insurgents will take place at the end of July and early August and involve some 10,000 troops altogether — 5,160 from the Afghan 205th corps and 4,430 with the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force.

That effort has been hobbled by another persistent Taliban tactic: Murder and intimidation.

The assassination campaign continued Thursday as gunmen shot to death a tribal elder in Kandahar city, officials said. At the same time, Afghan leaders called on the Taliban to release five health ministry workers kidnapped in Kandahar province on Wednesday.

Among the victims of the campaign was 24-year-old Mohammed Ibrahim, who was shot 36 times and hanged by the Taliban in March because his brother works as an interpreter for Western forces, friends and family said Thursday.

"If the Americans leave, things will get worse," said Ibrahim's 70-year-old father, Ghulam Sakhi, said Thursday.

Sakhi lives in an Afghan no-man's-land between the Afghan base that came under attack this week and sprawling orchards on the outskirts of Kandahar where the Taliban roam freely.

Two Afghan police posts overlook the contested orchards. However, Sakhi said that they rarely challenge Taliban fighters who routinely set up temporary checkpoints within a few hundred yards of the Afghan forces.

"They can't protect us," he said. "They just stay in their posts."