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AP News

Bomb kills 3 in Afghan capital ahead of conference

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A suicide bomber slipped through the Afghan capital's tight security ring Sunday, killing three civilians near a busy market two days ahead of an international conference hosting representatives from about 60 nations, officials said.

An American service member died in a roadside bombing in the south and other weekend attacks left 14 Afghans dead, reports said, as the Taliban meet the arrival of thousands more U.S. troops this year with a rising tide of violence.

The Kabul bomber was on foot near the market and his target was unclear, police official Abdul Ghafar Sayedzada said.

Hospitals reported three civilians killed, including a child, public health official Kabir Amiri said. Health Ministry spokesman Ghulam Sakhi Kargar said about 45 people were wounded.

University student Tamim Ahmad said he saw a man on foot run up to a passing convoy of international troops and detonate an explosives-laden vest. However, Afghan authorities and NATO said no foreign troops were operating in the area at the time of the attack, which the international force condemned.

"The insurgents have chosen to use violence to gain media attention, once again at the expense of innocent Afghan civilians," said Col. William Maxwell, an operations official with the NATO-led force.

Security has been tightened across the capital ahead of Tuesday's Kabul Conference, which will be attended by the heads of NATO and the United Nations and top diplomats, including U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton. The meeting — held nearly nine years after U.S.-backed forces toppled the Taliban's radical Islamist regime for sheltering al-Qaida terrorist leaders — is to discuss the country's reconstruction and eventual handing over of all security to the Afghan government.

Thousands of Afghan police were setting up checkpoints and patrolling Kabul trying to prevent any insurgent attack on the meeting or its delegates. Afghan and international officials said Saturday that authorities had arrested a Taliban bomb-maker involved in a plot to attack the conference, but they gave no details.

In May, the Taliban briefly disrupted a national peace conference in Kabul with rocket-propelled grenades that landed about 100 yards (meters) from the site of the gathering, and insurgents also waged a gunbattle with police outside the meeting. Three civilians, but no conference delegates, were wounded.

The NATO-led international force is being bolstered by 30,000 more American troops this year, and allied forces say they have captured or killed dozens of Taliban leaders in recent months. However, their tactics have not been able to reduce insurgent attacks, which have intensified this year across the country.

An intercepted memo from Afghan Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar indicates the Islamist militants are gearing up for a long fight.

Omar, who is believed to be hiding in Pakistan, urged his followers to obtain more heavy weapons and to assassinate or kidnap any Afghans — especially women — working with President Hamid Karzai's government, NATO said Sunday.

On Sunday, Taliban fighters battled government forces for a fourth day in remote Nuristan in the northeast, as insurgents who briefly took over the district of Barg-e-Matal two months ago launched another offensive.

Nuristan Gov. Jamaludin Badar denied Taliban claims they had retaken the area, saying local police were waging gunbattles with hundreds of militants but the government was still in control. He said 18 insurgents and two police have died and thousands of the district's residents have fled north.

The Taliban overran Barg-e-Matal, a government outpost in a mountainous region near the Pakistan border, in late May but were driven out days later by elite Afghan troops flown in on U.S. helicopters.

The Taliban also staged a brazen jailbreak Sunday in the western province of Farah, where a smuggled bomb exploded at a prison, allowing 11 inmates — including suspected insurgents — to escape from the facility that held about 350, officials said.

A guard died in that blast and one inmate was shot and killed while fleeing, said provincial police chief Gen. Mohammad Faqir Askir.

In the key southern city of Kandahar, where international forces are trying to wrest control of Taliban-dominated areas, two police officers and a civilian died Sunday morning when a roadside bomb exploded near a hospital, local police chief Sadar Mohammad Zazai said.

Elsewhere in the south on Saturday, four Afghan policemen died when insurgents attacked a checkpoint in Gereshk district of Helmand province, the Afghan Ministry of Interior said. Meanwhile, a gunbattle in Uruzgan province killed three police officers and four Taliban, according to Gulab Khan, the deputy provincial police chief.

Also Sunday, a car bomb exploded near the largest U.S. base in Afghanistan, but killed only the suicide attacker, who was unable to get near either Bagram Air Field or a convoy carrying an international reconstruction team, said Gen. Abdul Rahman Sayedkhail, police chief of Parwan province.

A Taliban spokesman for the area, Zabiullah Majahid, claimed the bomb killed 12 Americans. The insurgents often exaggerate death tolls of their enemies for propaganda purposes.

The Ministry of Defense also said one Afghan soldier died and another was wounded in Sabari district of Khost province Saturday after their vehicle hit a roadside bomb.

An American service member was killed Sunday by a roadside bomb in southern Afghanistan, a NATO statement said. So far in July, 55 international troops have died in Afghanistan, 40 of them American. Last month was the deadliest of the war for the multinational forces, with 103 killed.

U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden argued Sunday that the rising U.S. death toll does not mean that the new counterinsurgency strategy for the war is failing.

Speaking on ABC's "This Week," Biden said most military strategists expected the summer months to be especially deadly because coalition forces are more frequently engaging the insurgents. He said the "surge" in troops should be given time to work.

"All of this is just beginning. And we knew it was going to be a tough slog," Biden said. "But I think it's much too premature to make a judgment until the military said we should look at it, which is in December."