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McClatchy Washington Bureau

How did a suicide bomber get to Kabul's NATO headquarters?

Jonathan S. Landay

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghan authorities are trying to determine how a suicide bomber breached tight security in Kabul's diplomatic quarter on Saturday and detonated an SUV packed with explosives in front of NATO headquarters five days before the presidential election.

At least seven people died and 91 others were injured by the explosion, according to a Defense Ministry statement.

The blast underscored the Taliban's ability to mount attacks in the heart of the Afghan capital despite stringent measures that the government and NATO say they are taking to safeguard Thursday's vote.

U.S. Navy Lt. Todd Vician, a spokesman for the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force, said that a "handful" of ISAF troops were among those injured, but he declined to identify their nationality. Soldiers from Macedonia, along with Afghan police, handle security at the steel-gated ISAF headquarters entrance.

The wounded also included four Afghan soldiers and Awa Alam Nuristani, a member of parliament and head of President Hamid Karzai's campaign for women, the Defense Ministry said.

Taliban spokesmen took responsibility for the attack in calls to news agencies. It was the first major assault in Kabul since Feb. 28, when 28 people died after insurgents stormed into the Justice Ministry and two other government buildings.

The ISAF compound, protected by high blast walls, razor wire, and concrete blocks, is the headquarters of U.S. Army Gen. Stanley A. McCrystal, the commander of the 100,000-strong ISAF. It was not known if he was inside when the explosion went off around 8:30 a.m. local time.

The blast spewed shards of metal, set cars on fire and blew out windows in nearby buildings, echoing across the capital as smoke towered into the air.

Many of the casualties were workers on their way to jobs at the Ministry of Transportation and the state-run radio and television building, which sit opposite the ISAF compound on what is usually a quiet, leafy street.

Afghan police and troops and ISAF soldiers quickly sealed off the scene as medics loaded the dead and wounded into Afghan military ambulances.

"When I left the ministry and turned into the intersection, there was a huge explosion. It was very powerful and there was smoke and dust everywhere," said Dil Agha, 35, a driver for the Ministry of Transportation. "This is very bad. These people (the casualties) were here just to earn a piece of bread for themselves."

Gen. Zahir Azimi, the spokesman for the Ministry of Defense, said the bomber was driving a grey Toyota Landcruiser.

Azimi said that an investigation was under way to determine how the bomber was able to pass through at least three police checkpoints and reach the front of the ISAF headquarters.

The bomber's ability to get as far as he did fueled uncertainty about the ability of ISAF and Afghan security forces to prevent the Taliban from making good on a vow to disrupt Thursday's election for president and the country's 34 provincial councils.

It was not clear if the headquarters was the intended target or if the bomber was bound for the U.S. embassy, which is about 150 yards further down the street, but was intercepted and detonated his explosives before he could get there. The embassy was the target of several attempted bombings last year.

The presidential palace is also in the same vicinity.

"Our enemies are trying to carry out such attacks, but we are taking all efforts using all our capabilities to prevent them," Azimi said.

Foreign embassies and ISAF headquarters implemented security "lockdowns," cancelling appointments and closing down to non-staff members.

Karzai, who is favored to win re-election to a second five-year term, blamed the blast in a statement on "enemies of Afghanistan" who are "trying to create fear among the people as we get close to the election."

