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Al Jazeera

Deadly blasts rock Afghan capital

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Friday is a national holiday as Afghanistan marks its independence from Britain [Reuters]

At least nine people have been killed as a wave of large explosions followed by a stand off rocked a British cultural centre in the Afghan capital Kabul on a public holiday marking the country's independence from Britain.

Two blasts struck the British Council offices in the center of the city at about 5:45am after

several fighters infiltrated the compound.

In the next seven hours, the Afghan police struggled to gun down the one remaining fighter holed up in the basement of the building.

Britain's foreign ministry, in a statement, finally confirmed that all the fighters involved in the attack were killed.

Reports of casualties varied, but police officials said at least nine people were killed, including several policemen and two municipality cleaners sweeping the streets early in the morning.

Al Jazeera's Bernard Smith, reporting from Kabul, said the fighters were "extremely well armed" and prepared for a long battle with the police.

"This has been an operation led by the Afghan forces. International forces have been here, but mostly in the background," he said.

"But it seems like they are having a very difficult job getting the last Taliban fighter.

British target

The Friday attacks, claimed by the Taliban, come as the country marks its independence from Britain in 1919.

"We understand that the Taliban wanted to target a British target on the 92nd anniversary of Britain recognizing Afghanistan's independence," said Smith

"The British Council did not have the high level of protection that the embassy would have, so it was an easier target."

A spokesman for the British Embassy in Kabul could not immediately comment.

At the scene was the burning wreckage of a car that had rammed into the wall of an office and exploded.

There were ambulances on hand and helicopters overhead, an AFP reporter said.

While violence continues to rage in many parts of Afghanistan, attacks in the capital are relatively uncommon.

In June, 21 people were killed at a Kabul hotel, including nine fighters as they battled NATO and Afghan troops for five hours with rocket-propelled grenades and suicide bombs.