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Suicide Bombers Escalate Assaults on Afghanistan

By Ray Rivera

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KABUL - Suicide bombers stepped up attacks in southern Afghanistan on Saturday in advance of Id al-Fitr, the festival next week that celebrates the end of Ramadan. But though Afghan security forces were the intended targets, civilians took the biggest toll.



Officials remove the body of a suicide attacker in Helmand province August 19, 2011. A suicide bomber who tried to get inside the Helmand provincial governor's compound blew himself up as police began firing at him after he refused to stop,

Three separate blasts in Helmand and Kandahar Provinces left at least seven civilians dead, four of them children, and wounded dozens more, Afghan officials said. The attacks continued a pattern of violence across the country that is taking a disproportionately larger toll on ordinary citizens than on government and coalition forces. At least 17 civilians have been killed in the past three days in scattered attacks across the country, including five in a NATO airstrike.

Security forces nationwide have been on high alert anticipating increased violence with the onset of Id al-Fitr, in which Muslims celebrate the end of the month of fasting. Here in the capital, more than 13,000 extra police officers have been put on duty through the three-day festival, which begins early next week, to thwart Taliban threats of intensified attacks, officials with the Interior Ministry said.

In the deadliest of Saturday's attacks, a suicide bomber detonated a vehicle packed with explosives outside a crowded bank in the southern city of Lashkar Gah, where Afghan soldiers and police officers were lined up at noontime to receive their monthly pay. Security forces stopped the car before it entered the bank, preventing a much higher death toll. Instead, the vehicle detonated in Mukhaberat Square, a busy intersection outside the bank near the provincial governor's compound, police officials said.

Aizatullah, 25, a police officer who goes by one name, raced out of the bank when he heard the explosion.

"I saw bodies of police, soldiers and civilians bleeding and screaming everywhere," he said. "I didn't know if it was a suicide attack or a car bomb."

Col. Ismail Khan, the director of the Helmand provincial police coordinating center, said intelligence officials had warned that a bombing was possible.

"We knew about a possible suicide attack in Lashkar Gah, and we had our security preparations ready for it," Colonel Khan said. "That's why we were able to stop the bomber from entering the bank."

Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand Province, carries symbolic importance to insurgents and government forces alike because it was among the first to be turned over to Afghan security control last month, though a strong coalition presence remains in the area.

The bombing bore echoes of a February attack on a Kabul Bank branch in the eastern city of Jalalabad. In that attack, gunmen wearing suicide vests stormed the branch as soldiers and officers were collecting their pay, killing 18 people and wounding more than 70 before security forces gunned them down.

In two other attacks on Saturday in Kandahar City, suicide bombers in sport utility vehicles apparently headed for police substations detonated their charges moments apart and short of their targets, killing three civilians, including a child, and wounding more than 22 others, according to the Interior Ministry. Many of them were children playing nearby. In at least one of the attacks, police officers tried to stop the vehicle at a checkpoint and fired on it, causing it to swerve into a wall and explode, wounding 11 people, including two police officers.

Saturday's attacks followed a pair of bomb blasts on Friday in the western provinces of Herat and Faryab, including one in a mosque courtyard, that left five people dead and 24 wounded.

And, on Thursday night, a NATO airstrike killed a mother and her four children in Logar Province just south of Kabul after three Taliban fighters took over their home and used it to fire on Afghan and coalition forces, killing three Afghan soldiers, said Mohammad Rahim, the governor of Baraki Barak District, where the attack occurred.

Afghan and coalition forces called in the airstrike after they continued to take fire and the Taliban refused to surrender, Mr. Rahim said. The owner of the home, the headmaster of a local girls' school, was wounded in the airstrike, Mr. Rahim said. NATO officials are investigating the episode.

A United Nations report in July painted a bleak picture for civilians caught up in the Afghanistan conflict, especially as insurgents shift their targets away from fortified military installations toward softer, civilian targets, and step up their use of roadside bombs.

In the first six months of the year, 1,462 civilians were killed, the report said, a 15 percent increase from the same period in 2010 and more than any comparable period since the war began. Insurgents were responsible for 80 percent of the deaths, the United Nations said, while Afghan and coalition forces were responsible for 14 percent. The remaining 6 percent were unattributed.