

## Suicide bombers get inside police headquarters

Insurgents' ability to come within striking distance of top Afghan security commanders points to Taliban's intelligence strength

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KABUL — A pair of suicide bombers, trying to kill two of Kandahar's most powerful security commanders, got inside the provincial police headquarters yesterday and almost reached their targets before blowing themselves up.

Estimates of the dead and wounded varied wildly, with Afghan officials saying two to eight people were killed, and 30 to 40 wounded. All of the dead and most of the wounded were police officers.

The attack showcased the Taliban's intelligence strength, as local officials said the insurgents timed their strike to the moment when General Abdul Razik, a prominent commander who controls a key road into Pakistan, was arriving at the headquarters for a meeting with Kandahar's new police chief, Sumanwal Matiullah.

Provincial officials initially denied either of them was hurt, but a Taliban spokesman quickly reported that Gen. Razik had been wounded. A government adviser later confirmed that the general's foot had been injured by glass or shrapnel, and falling debris had hit the police chief without injuring him.

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The attack also highlighted the well-known weakness of the police in Kandahar. A visitor to police headquarters who passed through the gates just minutes before the attack at about 1:20 p.m. said he noticed the front gate was manned by eight guards lounging around a sun-shaded swinging deck chair, giving visitors only cursory searches before lifting the metal boom that blocks the driveway into the compound.

Police vehicles are routinely waved through the gates, and several witnesses said the attackers exploited this habit by arriving in a marked police pickup truck wearing the dull-blue uniforms of the Afghan National Police.

The previous police chief, who was fired after a spectacular jailbreak at the city jail in June, had earlier complained that ANP uniforms could be purchased on the black market. Insurgents also capture, kill or bribe enough police officers that Taliban members can frequently disguise themselves.

One of the bombers got inside the headquarters and reached the stairs toward the chief's office before exploding, while the other detonated near the main entrance where Gen. Razik was standing, according to a bleeding man named Ahmad, a staff member at the headquarters. The blasts were separated by only two or three minutes and it appears the initial one targeted Gen. Razik.

When local reporters later asked the police chief how suicide bombers could penetrate so far into his security cordon, the gruff officer dismissed the question.

"That's your job," Chief Matiullah said. "You find out how he got inside."

Nervous local security forces cordoned off a large swath of central Kandahar city after the attack, at one point firing warning shots at what they mistakenly believed was another suicide bomber.

Shopkeepers saw white Toyota Land Cruisers with smashed windows, apparently the convoy of Gen. Razik, racing out of the headquarters toward the hospital. At least three pickup trucks followed later. One witness described what appeared to be bodies or badly

injured people heaped in the back of the vehicles, perhaps eight or nine in each truck.

Zulmay Ayuobi, a spokesman for the Kandahar governor, said those injured included eight civilians and one of the few female police officers in the religiously conservative south.

Young and flamboyant, Gen. Razik has risen to prominence in southern Afghanistan by controlling the Spin Boldak border crossing, one of two major land routes into Pakistan. A major source of ordinary trade, the route also allows NATO and U.S. forces to bring vital shipments of fuel, water and other supplies from Pakistan's ports. The same road is believed to serve as a conduit for drugs, and nearby mountain passes allow the Taliban to move weapons and ammunition to the battlefields of Kandahar.

As ordinary people watched dead and injured police streaming into the hospital, many of them reacted with disbelief.

"We are hopeless," said Sabir, 25, a student visiting relatives at the hospital. "The police station is the place where they are supposed to command the whole province and bring security for all the people, but they cannot take care of their own security."

Another man, Wahid, 31, agreed.

"The governor was changed, the police chief was changed and we hoped the new leaders would bring security," he said. "But then this happened inside the police station. We hope many police survived, so they can work to improve the situation."

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