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European Languages

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The Washington Post

## Afghan President Karzai blames NATO intelligence failure for spate of attacks

By Kevin Sieff

04/16/2012

KABUL — One day after a spate of attacks left four civilians and 11 members of the security forces dead, President Hamid Karzai blamed the insurgent offensive on a NATO intelligence failure, which he said should be investigated.

Western officials are praising Afghan security forces for their largely independent response to the rare coordinated attacks. Three dozen assailants, including some suicide bombers, were killed by Afghan security forces who — after many hours — succeeded in halting the attacks.

In a statement issued by his office, the Afghan president also implicated his country's own intelligence agency, but said the attacks across Afghanistan were a failure “especially for NATO.”

Insurgent activity appeared to have died down by Monday afternoon, as Afghan police and troops, backed by NATO forces, secured the staging grounds from which insurgents on Sunday had staged nearly simultaneous assaults on diplomatic and security installations.

The attacks spanned some of the country's most important population centers but resulted in relatively few deaths — illustrating the insurgents' ability to penetrate well-fortified sites but

raising questions about the potency of their attacks. Karzai's office said at least 32 civilians and 42 security force members were wounded in the violence.

In statements to the media, the Taliban called the assaults "a message that our spring offensive has begun," and a prelude to future violence.

Afghanistan's intelligence agency said its agents arrested two would-be suicide bombers and an "attack facilitator" who were planning to assassinate the country's second vice president, Mohammad Karim Khalili.

The attack facilitator reportedly told investigators that he belonged to the Haqqani network — a group affiliated with the Taliban, but with its own autonomous leadership — and had been trained as an insurgent across the border in Pakistan. The Haqqani network has been blamed for previous high-profile attacks, including the protracted attack on the U.S. Embassy in September.

Both Karzai and Western officials praised local security forces for minimizing civilian casualties and foiling the attacks. "Terrorists ... must know that by launching such attacks they can not prevent the determination of the peoples of this homeland of ours from the path of rebuilding and progress, as well our goal for reaching peace and tranquility in our country," Karzai said.

Still, as the United States prepares to withdraw its combat troops by 2014, such attacks place stress on a brittle security situation that the NATO-trained Afghan army and police will soon inherit.

The number of insurgent attacks across the country has picked up considerably in recent weeks, officials have noted, as fighters return from Pakistan.

Early Monday, Afghan-led forces fired one rocket-propelled grenade after another in an effort to defeat insurgents holed up in one building in the capital and another near parliament, the Associated Press reported.

The insurgents had held out for hours, firing at Afghan and Western security and diplomatic installations.

The initial blasts, which seemed to occur almost simultaneously, struck at least seven locations across eastern Afghanistan, including three targets in Kabul and a NATO base in the city of Jalalabad.

From their perch on the eighth floor of an unfinished commercial building in central Kabul, insurgents aimed rockets and rifles at NATO's military headquarters, only a few hundred yards away. In another attempted siege, they struck the Afghan parliament.

The casualty toll remained lower than many initially expected, however, drawing Western praise for the actions of Afghan security forces.

The Afghan security forces “were on scene immediately, well-led and well-coordinated. They integrated their efforts, helped protect their fellow citizens and largely kept the insurgents contained,” Gen. John R. Allen, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, said in a statement.

#### An urban battlefield

Less than an hour after the attack began, members of the Afghan Crisis Response Unit and their NATO trainers entered the building from which insurgents were firing. There were two large blast holes visible in the facade of the Kabul Star Hotel, frequented by Westerners and wealthy Afghans, located just across the street.

A few miles away, another group of insurgents occupied a building across from the parliament, as well as another construction site, from which they targeted nearby Western military installations.

“Armed insurgents, including some suicide bombers, have taken control of buildings in these areas,” said Sediq Sediqi, an Interior Ministry spokesman.

At least one lawmaker, Mohammad Hamid Lalai Hamidzai of Kandahar, fired back at insurgents from the roof of the parliament building.

“I have four of my armed bodyguards. We are using my personal guns, and we have exchanged fire with the attackers,” he said by telephone.

Even if the attacks’ consequences were relatively muted, the insurgency’s ability to navigate the security structures in and around Kabul, as well as other provincial capitals where attacks occurred, strikes at the heart of one of NATO’s greatest fears — that the Taliban will shift its efforts away from the battlefield and focus on destabilizing the country with a string of spectacular, urban attacks. Much of Western military strategy in restive eastern Afghanistan hinges on keeping insurgents away from the capital.

Although the Taliban has successfully executed spectacular attacks in the capital before, insurgents have rarely attacked so many disparate targets simultaneously.

#### Fighting persists

In addition to the attacks in Jalalabad and Kabul, insurgents attacked a public university in Paktia province and Afghan installations in Logar province. Some of the attackers wore women’s clothes to conceal their faces and packed unmarked trucks and vans with explosives and weapons.

In a statement released Sunday night, NATO played down the significance of the incidents, calling them “largely ineffective.”

But well after midnight, the fighting in Kabul still appeared to be intense. NATO helicopters flew over residential neighborhoods while gunfire was exchanged below.

Through the night, crowds remained near the unfinished eight-story building in Kabul, including workers who fled the construction site when the violence began. Some of them had colleagues and relatives still stuck in the building and adjoining shops. One of those workers, Ali Jan, 37, had been communicating by phone with his brother, who had been stuck inside for seven hours. Shortly after sunset, the phone went dead.

“I’m worried,” Jan said, “but my brother told me he was in a safe room. He told me he would be okay.”