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Reuters

Afghan forces end Taliban siege of hotel, 13 dead

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Thirteen people were killed before a long siege was ended at a popular hotel outside the Afghan capital, during which **Taliban** gunmen took scores of hostages, another bold attack that showed a potent insurgency remains after more than a decade of war.

Five militants armed with rocket-propelled grenades, suicide bomb vests and machine guns attacked the exclusive, lakeside hotel around midnight on Thursday, bursting into a party and shooting dead hotel guards.

Kabul police chief Ayoub Salangi said on Friday four civilians, three hotel guards and a policeman were killed in the 12-hour gunbattle at the Spozhmai hotel, overlooking Qargha Lake. All five attackers were also killed.

The attack, quickly claimed by the Afghan Taliban, again showed the ability of insurgents to stage high-profile raids even as **NATO** nations prepare to withdraw most of their combat troops by the end of 2014 and leave Afghans to lead the fight.

Many terrified guests jumped into the lake in the darkness to escape the carnage, Afghan officials and residents said. Up to 300 people had been inside the hotel when the attack began.

"Insurgent Taliban were using civilians as human shields to protect themselves, and even this morning around 50 locals were still held as hostages," Sediq Sediqqi, a spokesman for the Afghan Interior Ministry, told reporters.

Earlier, elite Afghan quick-response police backed by NATO troops freed at least 35 hostages in an operation that only began in earnest after sunrise to help security forces avoid civilian deaths in night-time confusion.

NATO attack helicopters could be seen over the single-storey hotel building and a balcony popular with guests for its sunset views, while a pall of smoke rose into air.

The Taliban complained wealthy Afghans and foreigners used the hotel, about 10 km (6 miles) from the centre of [Kabul](#), for "prostitution" and "wild parties" ahead of the Friday religious day holiday.

Launching their annual offensive this spring, the Taliban threatened to attack more government officials and rich Afghans, but the hotel assault was one of few in which multiple hostages were taken since the start of the war, now in its 11th year.

"This is a crime against humanity because they targeted children, women and civilians picnicking at the lake. There wasn't even a single soldier around there," said General Mohammad Zahir, head of the Kabul police investigation unit.

Television pictures showed several people wading out of the lake onto a balcony and clambering over a wall to safety.

NEW FACE OF INSURGENCY?

Soldiers and police fanned out around the hotel at dawn, arriving in cars and armored Humvee vehicles and taking cover behind trees flanking the lake and a nearby golf course.

Police said they wanted to stage a rescue without resorting to a frontal attack that could kill the hotel guests who had been taken hostage.

Qargha Lake is one of Kabul's few options for weekend getaways. Restaurants and hotels that dot the shore are popular with Afghan government officials and businessmen, particularly on Thursday nights.

Guests at the Spozhmai must pass through security checks before entering the hotel, where tables with umbrellas overlook the water, but security is relatively light for a city vulnerable to militant attacks.

Violence across Afghanistan has surged in recent days, with three U.S. soldiers and more than a dozen civilians killed in successive attacks, mostly in the country's east where NATO-led forces have focused their efforts during the summer fighting months.

NATO commanders, halfway into the process of transferring security responsibility to Afghan forces, are racing through training for the Afghan army and police, including holding basic literacy classes for recruits.

Several well-planned assaults in Kabul in the past year have raised questions about whether the Taliban and their al Qaeda-linked Haqqani network allies have shifted tactics to embrace high-profile attacks targeting landmarks, foreigners and Afghanistan's elite, extending a guerrilla war once primarily waged in the countryside.

Afghan insurgents attacked Kabul's heavily protected diplomatic and government district on April 15 in an assault, eventually quelled by Afghan special forces guided by Western mentors, similar to one in September 2011.

Militants also killed eight people in an attack on the upscale [Intercontinental hotel](#) in Kabul in June 2011.

President Hamid Karzai told a special session of parliament on Thursday that attacks by insurgents against Afghan police and soldiers were increasing as most foreign combat troops prepare to leave Afghanistan by the end of 2014.