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Foreigners consider fleeing Kabul as attacks against them rise

By Tim Craig

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Rokey W. Suleman II, a former elections chief in both the District and Fairfax County, was nervous when he decided in January to make his first trip to Afghanistan to serve as an international observer of presidential elections in April.

But when Suleman arrived in Kabul in late February, he felt surprisingly secure. He was staying at the four-star Serena Hotel, behind four layers of security and blast walls. The streets looked dirty, he thought, but hardly resembled a battle zone.

What appear to be random attacks by Afghan security officials are increasing the pace at which foreigners are leaving Kabul.

“I felt everything was as good as it can be,” said Suleman, 46. “I felt comfortable there.”

That changed on March 20, when Suleman found himself in the middle of a major Taliban assault inside the hotel, previously viewed as one of the safest locations in the capital. Since then, foreigners have continued to come under attack, raising new fears about security as coalition forces prepare to withdraw from Afghanistan this year.

Since Jan. 20, foreign civilians have been killed in violent assaults on a popular Lebanese restaurant, a Western guesthouse and other venues where foreigners congregate in Kabul. Afghan security officials have turned their weapons on foreigners in two other attacks, most recently on Thursday, when an Afghan police officer killed three Americans at a Christian hospital in Kabul.

On Friday, the consequences of that attack were reverberating across Kabul, as foreigners huddled with safety consultants and colleagues to debate whether they should stay or go.

“I think people are going to start leaving, which is unfortunate for the people of Afghanistan, but fortunate for their own safety,” said Kimberley Motley, an American lawyer who has a practice in Kabul and has been traveling to Afghanistan since 2008. “A year ago, you could differentiate the good guys from the bad guys, but now it seems like some of the bad guys are just lurking.”

A changing city

Even before the latest violence, Kabul had been transitioning from a city where foreigners took taxis and attended loud parties into one where they increasingly stay indoors and seek to keep as low a profile as possible.

Security analysts and other observers are divided over how safe Kabul will be for the international community in the future.

Coalition commanders and Afghan security officials insist that the Afghan army and police force are becoming more efficient at disrupting plots and repelling attacks. But one executive at a major security firm, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to protect clients, said the situation facing foreigners in Kabul is “tenuous” and unlikely to improve in the short term.

Graeme Smith, the senior Afghanistan analyst for the International Crisis Group, said he believes foreigners could be the target of even more lethal attacks in the coming months. He said he is preparing to publish research showing there was a 15 to 20 percent increase in violence last year in Afghanistan, contrary to coalition statistics that show a decline.

“What I expect is that violence will keep rising in 2014 and 2015, and Kabul will not escape that trend,” said Smith, a former journalist who has been working in Afghanistan since 2005. “I expect Kabul will remain firmly in the hands of the government, but I think all the [nongovernmental organizations] and internationals here are going to have to think long and hard about their exposure.”

Justine Piquemal, director of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development, said she doubts that many of the 3,000 registered nongovernmental organizations in Afghanistan will make a hasty decision to leave.

Many already operate under heightened security precautions and cannot afford additional safety measures, she said. But most people drawn to a place like Afghanistan, she said, will likely want to stay to make sure their work pays off.

“We knew we were coming into conflict, and we are here because Afghans need us,” Piquemal said. “We are not going to let one guy with a gun draw us away from these issues.”

A close call

In Suleman’s case, it was four gunmen. They had sneaked pistols into the Serena by hiding them in their shoes.

That evening, Suleman, who was head of the D.C. Board of Elections from 2009 to 2011 and Fairfax’s elections registrar before that, met another election observer from Paraguay for dinner in the hotel’s main restaurant. As they nibbled on salad and talked about their mutual affection for the Beatles, a man on the other side of the restaurant suddenly flipped over a table.

Shouting ensued, and there was a crack of gunfire. Suleman looked up, and out of the corner of his eye saw what he thought was a body lying on the floor of the restaurant.

“Then I heard a few more pops,” Suleman said. “Then I was like, ‘Oh my God, this is really happening. This is a terrorist attack.’ ”

Suleman dived under his table, then crawled to the base of the restaurant’s colorful dessert tower. Within seconds, a young Taliban militant was walking toward him with a pistol. Suleman crawled across the floor and hid under a table with Sardar Ahmad, an Afghan reporter for Agence France-Presse who had been eating in the restaurant with his wife and three children.

When Suleman looked up, one gunman was huddled over the election observer from Paraguay, Luis María Duarte, who had remained near the dessert tower. The gunman fired, and Suleman saw Duarte flinch, then get up and run toward the kitchen.

Suddenly, the gunman was standing over Suleman and Ahmad, who pleaded that his family be spared. Suleman said the attacker turned and shot two Canadian women at a nearby table, killing both.

As the gunman stopped to reload, Suleman rose and ran into the kitchen, where a cook helped him into a safe room.

When he emerged two hours later, after the four attackers had been killed, Suleman learned that Duarte did not survive. His body was found near the kitchen. Ahmad, his wife, and two of his children were also dead.

“I’m only here due to dumb luck,” said Suleman, who returned to Washington this month after escorting Duarte’s body back to Paraguay.

Despite his harrowing experience, Suleman said he would like to return to Afghanistan to evaluate its progress toward establishing a new democratically elected government.

“But I think my family and every one of my friends would do everything they could to stop me,” he said.