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## International Aid Agencies Call for Temporary Exit From Afghanistan

12/1/2014

A three-week-long wave of Taliban attacks in Kabul has led several aid agencies to put their staff members on higher security alert, and some have sent foreign workers out of Afghanistan earlier than usual ahead of the holidays, aid officials say.

Few agencies said they were planning permanent pullouts, however, and most emphasized that they were determined to keep working in the country despite an unusual series of 11 attacks during that period in the capital.

Although the recent attacks have led to a new round of worrying about the future of Western endeavors here, by some measures this year has been much less dangerous for foreign agencies and their staffs than the year before.

So far in 2014, 36 aid workers have been killed and 95 wounded throughout Afghanistan, compared with 44 killed and 167 wounded in 2013, according to the Aid Worker Security Database, an American government-funded project that tracks attacks on humanitarian workers worldwide. While the 2014 figures have still not been verified, it is a substantial drop.

That said, Afghanistan remains by far the most dangerous country in the world in which to be an aid worker. Of the 229 aid workers killed or injured worldwide so far this year, 95 were in Afghanistan; that was true last year as well. No other country has come close in numbers of attacks on aid workers.

Several of the 11 recent attacks were against foreign targets, including a private American aid contractor, South African aid workers, and a British Embassy armored vehicle.

The most recent attack, on Saturday, killed three South Africans with a little-known aid group, a Christian pastor and his teenage son and daughter, in Karte Seh, an area where many foreigners live. Taliban insurgents said they were secretly Christian missionaries.

After that attack, several universities suspended classes, including the American University of Afghanistan, and at least one high school catering to the children of expats did so as well. The American University planned to reopen Tuesday, an official said.

“Everyone’s worried about it, and we’re all talking to each other about what to do,” said the director of the high school, who asked not to be named so as not to identify his school as a possible target. None of his foreign staff had left, however.

“I heard that three or four NGOs were pulling staff out, but wasn’t able to get names or confirmation,” a United Nations official said of nongovernmental organizations, speaking on condition of anonymity as a matter of policy. “I do know that people are getting nervous and some people are bringing their Christmas holidays forward to go home earlier. I know quite a few people who have done that.”

The United Nations has raised its alert status from green to gray in response to the latest attacks, meaning staff members were still going to their offices but were avoiding unnecessary travel outside the office, both in Kabul and elsewhere, another United Nations official said. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the news media about the precautions.

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“It’s more tense than it was three weeks ago,” the official said. “Everybody knows that. But our international officers, all of them are in town.”

Some businesses reportedly gave foreign employees the option of leaving the country early in response to the attacks, but there were no reports of any shutdowns.

Departures of foreign passengers had increased recently, said Mohammad Yaqub Rasuli, the head of the Kabul International Airport, but he said that was simply holiday-related. “The increase in their number is normal as in every year and has nothing to do with the security situation,” he said.

“We’ve taken some additional security precautions,” said Mike Fisher, an archaeologist from the University of Chicago, who works at the Afghan National Museum here. “But I don’t know anybody who’s leaving. A lot of my friends are actually staying for Christmas this year.”

“It’s a ‘better safe than sorry’ scenario,” said the second United Nations official. “But people aren’t making any long-term decisions to leave, other than those who already did.”

Many foreign workers left Afghanistan after a series of attacks early in the year, including a suicide attack on a popular restaurant, the Taverna du Liban, in which 21 people were killed, most of them foreigners, including diplomats and aid workers. Some employers instituted strict restrictions on staff members’ movements around Kabul, which are mostly still in place; restaurants catering to Westerners are nearly empty most nights, and survive only by takeout and delivery business.

Kabul has a large foreign community, with more foreign embassies than similarly small countries, numerous United Nations agencies, and about 2,300 aid groups, many with international staff members. More than 3,000 foreign aid workers are registered with the Afghan government, and many others are unregistered.

Through much of the Afghan war, aid groups were largely immune to deliberate attacks by the insurgents. But two factors seem to have changed that. One has been the increased use by the American government and other foreign donors of private aid contractors in recent years, which blurred the lines between independent humanitarian groups and military or government-affiliated ones. Another has been the increasing tempo of insurgent attacks throughout the country.