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Taliban truck bomb rocks hotel for foreigners in Kabul

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A Taliban truck bomb blasted through a hotel for foreigners in Kabul early Monday, killing at least one policeman just days after the deadliest attack in the Afghan capital for 15 years.

The powerful bombing, which rattled windows several kilometres (miles) away, paved the way for armed insurgents to enter the heavily guarded facility, close to Kabul's international airport.

The attack on Northgate, a compound for foreign contractors which was previously attacked in July 2013, underscores the worsening security situation as the Taliban ramp up their annual summer offensive.

"A truck bomb packed with explosives struck the outer wall of the hotel," Kabul police chief Abdul Rahman Rahimi told AFP.

"Afghan special forces subsequently entered the compound, killing two armed attackers. One policeman also lost his life and three others were wounded."

Rahimi did not reveal the exact number of attackers, saying clearance operations were still ongoing more than six hours after the attack started.

Afghan commandos cordoned off all arterial roads leading to Northgate, with erratic grenade explosions and gunfire coming from the scene after daybreak.

The hotel was not immediately reachable by telephone.

But local TV station Tolo cited a source inside the facility as saying that all the staff and guests -- including 11 foreigners -- were unharmed as they hunkered down in safe rooms.

It added that NATO special forces were overseeing the clearance operation at the Northgate, a luxury enclave which had been fortified with blast walls, watchtowers and sniffer dogs.

Tremors from the massive truck bombing, which was preceded by a power outage, were felt across the city.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said insurgents armed with rocket-propelled grenades and other weapons blasted their way into the compound after the truck bomb went off.

He claimed that more than 100 "American invaders" were killed and wounded in the assault. The Taliban are routinely known to exaggerate the toll from their attacks.

The assault comes as the Taliban ramp up their annual summer offensive after a brief lull during the holy fasting month of Ramadan, which ended in early July.

- Growing insecurity -

A chillingly similar Taliban attack on the compound in July 2013 -- a truck bomb followed by a gun siege -- killed nine people, including four Nepalese.

Monday's attack comes after twin bombings left 80 people dead in the Afghan capital on July 23, in the deadliest attack in the city since the Taliban were ousted from power in 2001.

The bombings tore through crowds of minority Shiite Hazara protesters as they gathered to demand that a major power line be routed through the central province of Bamiyan, one of the most deprived areas of Afghanistan.

That attack claimed by the Islamic State group, which is less powerful than the Taliban but is making gradual inroads into Afghanistan.

Afghan forces backed by US airstrikes have since intensified an offensive against IS jihadists in their eastern stronghold of Nangarhar.

The latest attacks in Kabul are a grim indicator of growing insecurity in Afghanistan, which has resulted in large civilian casualties.

The UN last week said civilian casualties rose to a record high in the first half of 2016, with children in particular paying a heavy price as the conflict escalates.

Between January and June, 1,601 civilians were killed and 3,565 were wounded -- a four percent increase in casualties compared to the same period last year, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said.

Monday's assault illustrates the report's finding that suicide bombings and complex attacks are now hurting more civilians than roadside bombs.