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TIME

Supermarket Attack: A Dangerous Turn in Kabul

By Ilius Cavendish in Kabul

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A suicide bomber blew himself up in a popular grocery close to the British, Canadian and Pakistani missions in Kabul Friday afternoon in an indiscriminate attack that analysts say could spell the beginning of a new trend in the Afghan capital. Unlike most previous attacks, this one fell on the Afghan weekend and was timed to inflict maximum civilian casualties as predominantly Western shoppers browsed through the store on their day off.

The bomber, a man in his 40s with dark skin and a long beard according to one witness, shot his way into the grocery, threw one or possibly two grenades and then detonated his vest. By late Friday night the death toll had reached nine, including a child and four Filipinos — probably employees of one of the many contractors working in Afghanistan. The nationalities of the other victims, including two wounded shoppers in critical condition, are still unknown.

"I was inside the store," Mary Hayden, a Western consultant, says. "To my left, I heard a gunshot. A bomb went off. Everyone was running to the back of the building." As the store went up in flames, wide-eyed survivors stumbled to safety amid a surreal medley of scattered peanut butter jars, exploded milk cartons and mutilated bodies. Plastic bags fluttered across the corpses and protein pills for body-builders spewed across the floor.

"There was chaos inside and people were running away," says Mehrab Gol, a phone card vendor who plies his trade outside the grocery. "There were many wounded but there was nobody there to carry them away." Staff at the store looked dazed as they searched for

missing colleagues amid the flames, smoke and household goods. Shattered glass lay everywhere and the store's doors had been blown out.

Security analysts say that despite the relative calm that has existed in Kabul for almost a year, insurgents have been reconnoitring a number of targets in the Afghan capital, and that the supermarket had come under Taliban surveillance late last year. Several restaurants popular with foreigners are also thought to be under observation. There have been a growing number of threats reported, and Taliban bombers have struck twice in recent weeks, although both times against military targets.

This time both the Taliban and a second insurgent faction, Hezb-i-Islami, claimed responsibility for the bombing, although until the identity and motivation of the bomber are established — and the kind of detonating device he was using known — it will be hard to gauge their veracity. In a text message sent to reporters, one insurgent spokesman said the attack was directed at the "chief of Blackwater" — a private security company.

Given that no Blackwater employees were in the store at the time of the attack, that may be an attempt to justify a vicious attack against civilians. Blackwater — now known as Xe, but still notorious for its record in Iraq — is symbolic of the worst excesses of mercenaries employed to protect Western officials. The mujahideen may simply have been tapping into popular anger against Western security firms.

In any case, Sami Kovanen, a senior analyst with Indiciium Consulting in Kabul, which provides security information, warns that the assumption had to be that "this kind of attack will happen again." Says Kovanen: "It's a new kind of attack — in many ways the first direct attack against the whole international community, against civilians." He adds, "There have been really specific reasons behind previous attacks. The attack on the Bektar guesthouse [in October 2009] targeted the U.N. during elections; the attack against the Indian guesthouse [in February 2010] targeted Indians. But [this one targeted] foreign civilians known to go shopping on Friday at this time. It was against us — regardless of who you are, which organization you're working for or what your nationality is. So in that way it is really concerning."

President Hamid Karzai condemned the attack. The "enemies of Afghanistan are so desperate that they are now killing civilians, including women, inside a food market," he said. "This is an attack against Islam."