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Day that claims 28 lives shows range of Afghan violence

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KABUL, Afghanistan — At least 28 people died in Afghanistan on Wednesday in three separate explosions of violence that illustrate the wide array of mayhem that wracks this country and the anger that surrounds U.S. actions here.

The first four died during a disputed night raid by U.S.-led troops who stormed a house shortly after midnight in the city of Taloqan, the capital of Takhar province, in Afghanistan's northwest.

The next 11 died in the riot that followed when 2,000 demonstrators gathered to protest that those killed, including two women, had been civilians.

The last 13 died when a suicide bomber drove an explosives-laden car into a bus that was carrying police academy trainers in the eastern province of Nangarhar, one of the most violent regions of the country. It was the latest in a series of suspected Taliban attacks on Afghan security forces.

The International Security Assistance Force, the U.S.-led coalition's formal name, said in a statement that the night raid had targeted a "facilitator" for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a militant group that was founded to overthrow the government of neighboring Uzbekistan but that's been fighting alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan. Afghan government statements, however, suggested that the dead were civilians.

The coalition gave a movie-script-worthy account of the raid, saying that one of the women was killed after she confronted the raiders with an AK-47 assault rifle, that a man was killed when he too picked up an AK-47 to engage the raiders and that a second woman was killed when she "rushed out of the targeted compound" and pointed a pistol at the troops.

"The security force engaged the female, resulting in her death," the statement said.

In his own statement, however, Afghan President Hamid Karzai described the dead as four members of one family. He lambasted the coalition for not coordinating the raid with Afghan authorities.

"Despite continuous warnings from the president of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for the prevention of uncoordinated NATO operations, it has not stopped completely," the statement said.

Abdul Jabar Taqwa, the provincial governor, while not identifying the dead, called the raid "a big mistake" in an interview with McClatchy. He said the coalition hadn't coordinated the raid with local Afghan forces.

"We had agreed with Americans that they would not conduct operations independently," Taqwa said. "This time they did not share the information with us. It was a big mistake, and a big catastrophe for this province."

Night raids have been one of the most controversial points of contention between Karzai's government and the U.S.-led coalition. U.S. commanders say that such raids, targeting Taliban members and sympathizers, are crucial to the coalition's strategy, but Karzai has protested that they claim civilian victims too often.

That controversy fueled what happened next, when an estimated 2,000 people marched on the local office of the coalition Provincial Reconstruction Team to protest the deaths. Such teams, usually staffed by Americans, coordinate coalition aid and other programs with local authorities.

Taqwa said the demonstration was peaceful at first, but that "Taliban insurgents and other intruders" turned it violent. They threw rocks and other debris at the PRT offices, followed by a grenade. Then armed members of the crowd opened fire, according to Taqwa's spokesman, Faiz Mohammad Tawhidi. Guards and security forces fired back.

"We've received 11 deaths and 83 injured, all civilians, for treatment so far," said Hafizullah Safi, the chief doctor at the provincial hospital. "Ten of the injured are in critical condition."

Another six were sent to a hospital in neighboring Kunduz province because the Takhar hospital couldn't handle all the wounded, Safi said.

It was the second such protest to end in violence in less than a week and at least the third this year.

On Saturday, one person was killed and three wounded when hundreds protested the killing of a 15-year-old youth in a night raid in Nangarhar province. Last month, a demonstration in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif to protest the burning of a Quran in the United States left seven U.N. workers dead and cost the lives of four Afghans.

The suicide bombing took place in Nangarhar province at around 5 p.m. Wednesday. In addition to the 13 killed, at least 20 people were wounded, according to Ahmad Zia Abdulzai, the spokesman for the provincial governor.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, but it was almost certainly the work of Taliban militants, who've targeted the police in a series of attacks in the past month.

"This attack is the work of those terrorists who fear the strengthening of Afghan security forces," Karzai said in a statement. He predicted that the bombing would have no impact on U.S. hopes to expand the security forces.

"The enemy must understand that there are thousands of real Afghans who are committed decisively to serve in the security forces and no enemy can stop them from the goal of ensuring peace and security in their country," the statement added.