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Taliban Attack Afghan Guards in Deadly Raid

By Alissa J. Rubin, Sharifullah Sahak

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Taliban fighters in a rural area near the Helmand River staged an audacious nighttime raid early Thursday, swooping down on several hundred sleeping Afghan private security guards who were securing a road construction project, and killing at least 21, according to guards who escaped.

The attack was striking not only for its scale and viciousness but because it took place in the Helmand River Valley, where thousands of British troops have been stationed for the past three years and where now American troops have entered to try to rout the Taliban.

News of the Taliban raid emerged Friday, as Senator John Kerry, Democrat of Massachusetts and the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, met with President Hamid Karzai for the second time in four days to discuss corruption among members of the Afghan government, some of whom have been implicated in several major cases. Support for the nine-year war, and for Mr. Karzai, is ebbing in the United States, while Gen. David H. Petraeus, the top American commander in Afghanistan, has signaled that, if anything, the troops would need more time on the ground to accomplish their mission.

Mr. Kerry said in a statement that he hoped to see anticorruption agencies strengthened and said “the work of these entities must be allowed to continue free from outside interference or political influence, including with respect to ongoing cases.”

He was referring to Mr. Karzai’s sharp criticism of the work of the American-mentored

Major Crimes Task Force and Sensitive Investigative Unit after a top Karzai aide, Mohammed Zia Saleh, was detained on graft charges. Mr. Karzai questioned the legality of both units and set up a commission to review their work; Mr. Saleh was released on orders from the attorney general's office.

The continuing complaints of government corruption have added to the difficulties the Americans face in trying to oust Taliban militants, build a credible central government and restore security for citizens.

In Helmand Province on Friday, interviews with security guards who survived the attack, as well as with police officers and village elders, suggested a confluence of factors was to blame: local frustration with the government, a subcontractor who had not hired local villagers for the road project and a vigorous Taliban that has not yet been weakened by Western troops.

The attack began at 3 a.m. on Thursday as most of the guards slept, said Mohammed Tahir, a guard for the Khushal Civil Construction Company, the subcontractor charged with guarding the road and the supplies for the project. It was unclear whether the Americans or one of the many other foreign governments involved in reconstruction here was the primary contractor. Security for the project involved about 1,200 guards, according to two Khushal employees.

Mr. Tahir painted a scene of chaos as his fellow guards woke to gunshots and ran for their lives. "When the Taliban attacked, they were killing everyone, whoever was sleeping, and our guards were running away from their posts and Taliban were hitting them with their vehicles," he said. "My brothers were working there, and I do not yet know what happened to them."

After a sporadic gunfight that lasted until 7 a.m., the Taliban attacked again; this time in larger numbers, said Abdul Qahir, who commanded 400 Khushal company guards.

"They came with eight Toyota Land Cruisers and drove fast toward us and broke the first security belt," he said, "and we were all firing on them, but they kept driving towards us and broke the second and third belts and drove over our concertina wires."

The death toll is likely to rise once all of the dead are recovered, Mr. Qahir said. Some of the victims were at the security company's checkpoints, which the Taliban seized. Reports of the toll varied: those closest to the attack said more than 21; NATO said fewer; the local police said 35.

Local elders said that the Taliban opposed the road — a strategic 21-mile connector between the cities of Sangin and Greshkh — fearing the increased access to an area they currently dominate, the elders said. That meshed with opposition from villagers, who were upset that the contractor had not consulted them about building the road or asked what services they needed, nor offered local people jobs on the project.

“One of the big problems that the contractors face and one reason they get attacked is because they bring people from other villages as laborers and security guards,” said Haji Abdul Ahad Khan, an elder who on Friday was attending the funeral of one of the slain security guards. “They do not ask our villagers to participate in these projects or hire them to do any of the labor.

“This makes our people angry,” he said. “And they start projects in our area without consulting the village elders. They start cleaning our canals for us or building a road for us. I don’t want a road, why would you build that? We need a school or a clinic.”

He added that the government was weak in the area, and that, adding to the general distrust, Afghan security forces behaved badly when they came. “The forces steal money and jewelry from houses, and sometimes when they see a boy, they take the boy with them,” he said. “These are the things that make people hate the government forces.”

Zemary Khan, the district police chief, said that the Taliban were strong in the area, but that the security guards were naïve to think they could protect themselves. “At the beginning they told us that ‘We can take care of this road and ourselves,’ ” he said. “Now, see they cannot even take care of themselves.

“The area is full of Taliban and the Taliban have deep influence there,” he added.

Despite the length of time foreign forces have been fighting in Helmand, it is large, with a porous southern border, and troops have yet to fight in many places. The last was the case here, said the police chief.

“Coalition forces have never been to these places to patrol, and neither have the Afghan police,” he said, “so this can be the reason that the Taliban can walk and do their activities freely.”