

Taliban Kill 24 Afghan Troops, With Inside Help

The militant group has attacked several government outposts since it signed a peace deal with the United States last month.

By David Zucchino and Fahim Abed

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KABUL — A Taliban ambush that appears to have had inside help killed up to 24 Afghan security forces in southern Afghanistan early Friday, officials said.

It was the latest Taliban assault on government forces since the militant group signed a peace agreement with the United States on Feb. 29. The Taliban have so far ceased attacks against American and coalition troops, but they have continued to target Afghan government forces.

A group of Taliban fighters attacked a joint police and army outpost around 3 a.m. Friday on the main highway to Kabul in Zabul Province, parts of which are under the militants' control. Rahmatullah Yarmal, the governor of Zabul Province, said the attackers were aided by at least five police officers who then escaped with the Taliban fighters.

The attackers burned the outpost after killing every man inside, said Haji Malim Kareem, a tribal elder from Qalat, the provincial capital.

"The outpost was attacked, and it completely collapsed in just one hour," Mr. Kareem said. "There was no one left alive."

The ambush came during an especially volatile period in Afghanistan. Since the signing of the peace agreement, the country has been shaken by the coronavirus crisis, a breakdown in negotiations over a prisoner release and a government split after a disputed presidential election that ended in President Ashraf Ghani and his chief rival, Abdullah Abdullah, separately taking the oath of office.

Direct negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban were supposed to begin March 10, with the ultimate goal a postwar government that would include the militants. The agreement envisioned a “confidence-building measure”: the release by March 10 of 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 security forces held by the militants.

But Mr. Ghani, whose government was excluded from the U.S.-Taliban negotiations, has said he would not release the prisoners without concessions from the Taliban, who have refused.

The dispute has stalled the peace process and left the government unable to set up its negotiating team. The coronavirus outbreak has further complicated that process, limiting face-to-face meetings and restricting travel as the government struggles to fight the virus.

The Feb. 29 signing ceremony was preceded by a weeklong “reduction in violence” by all sides, but the Taliban have since ramped up attacks on Afghan forces, targeting remote bases and outposts as they did in Zabul Province on Friday.

“We thought the Taliban would be flexible after announcing a reduction in violence, but they are becoming more aggressive against the security forces,” said Mr. Kareem, the tribal elder.

In a statement, Sediq Sediqqi, Mr. Ghani’s spokesman, said the attack had demonstrated the Taliban’s “commitment for continued violence and against the Afghan peace process.”

Afghan security forces have remained in active defensive positions since Feb. 29 and have not mounted major operations against the Taliban. Such operations in the past have been generally carried out with the help of American troops and aircraft.

The Ministry of Defense said in a statement on Friday that the government would retaliate for the attack, and put the death toll of security force members at 17.

“Afghan National Defense Security Forces will not leave this attack without response,” the ministry said, “and will take the revenge of the blood of the martyrs.”

Taimoor Shah contributed reporting from Kandahar, Afghanistan.