

Deadly Taliban Attack Probably Used Drone, a Worrisome Shift

The strike targeted the governor's compound in Kunduz, a province that has seen heavy fighting despite peace talks between Taliban and Afghan government negotiators.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — A Taliban attack, most likely carried out by a drone, killed at least four security officers in northern Afghanistan on Sunday, according to senior and local Afghan officials, representing what could be the group's first publicly known use of the method in the 19-year war.

The strike targeted the governor's compound in Kunduz, a province that has seen heavy fighting, like much of the country, in recent months despite continuing peace talks between Taliban and Afghan government negotiators in Qatar. At least eight other people were wounded in the blast, local officials said.

“When the Kunduz governor bodyguards were playing volleyball in the governor's guesthouse, the explosion took place among them,” said Ghulam Rabbani Rabbani, a member of Kunduz's provincial council.

“It is not clear that it was an explosion or a missile or drone attack,” he added.

Fazal Karim Aimaq, a member of the Afghan Parliament from Kunduz, said on his Facebook page that the episode represented “a new method of attack” but did not say if a drone had carried it out.

A Taliban spokesman did not respond to a request for comment.

The Taliban's use of small, over-the-counter drones has been limited in recent years to filming attacks for propaganda and reconnaissance. But, according to U.S. officials, there have been previous unreported instances of the remote-controlled devices being

used to drop munitions, a practice made popular by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in the past.

In May, a similar strike occurred on the Kunduz governor's compound, killing one person. At the time, the governor's spokesman said a missile had hit a farewell party — a large gathering much like Sunday's volleyball game — hosted by the governor. But later local officials said they believed a drone may have carried out the attack because of its precise nature.

If the strike on Sunday was indeed carried out by an armed drone, it would show the proliferation of a method of attack that could have wide-ranging and dire consequences for Afghan, United States and NATO forces.

Officials in Kunduz said that small Taliban drones used for surveillance were frequently seen in the skies there. In March, Afghan forces claimed to have shot down one of the drones.

Much of the Afghan security forces, whose morale is already low after a particularly brutal fall, fight from stationary checkpoints, often open-air outposts that are especially vulnerable to attacks from the sky.

American forces, as they move to withdraw completely from Afghanistan — as stipulated by a Feb. 29 peace agreement signed with the insurgent group in Qatar — have limited equipment available to counter the small, hard-to-detect drones. U.S. forces in Iraq have dealt with the Islamic State drone threat since 2014.

But under the February deal, the Taliban have not attacked U.S. troops aside from several unclaimed rocket strikes on American bases in the country's south.

The episode comes after the deadliest month in Afghanistan for civilians since September 2019, according to data compiled by The New York Times. At least 212 people were killed as Taliban fighters launched offensives in the country's south and east.

About 2,100 Afghan civilians were killed and 3,800 wounded in the first nine months of 2020, according to a United Nations report released Tuesday.

Mujib Mashal contributed reporting.