# *With Delay in Afghan Peace Talks, a Creeping Sense of 'Siege' Around Kabul*

Instead of mass-casualty attacks, the Taliban are carrying out targeted assaults in the capital and neighboring districts. The country's security forces seem unable to control them.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Mornings in the city begin with "sticky bombs," explosives slapped onto vehicles that go up in flames. With night comes the dread of hit-and-run assassinations in the nearby suburbs — government employees shot dead by motorcycle-riding insurgents who roam free.

As peace talks to end Afghanistan's long war face delays, the Taliban may be sparing Kabul, the capital, from mass-casualty attacks as part of an understanding with the United States. But the insurgents have instead shifted to a tactic that is eroding the Afghan government's standing with each passing day: frequent targeted assaults that the country's security forces seem unable to control.

The city has taken on an air of slow-creeping siege.

At least 17 small explosions and assassinations have been carried out in Kabul in the past week, according to a tally by The New York Times. Three magnetic bombs went off within one hour on Saturday morning, and at least two more targeted attacks followed before the end of the day.

The evening before, insurgents had killed at least three soldiers in Paghman district, 10 miles west of the city, and another in Qarabagh district, 30 miles north. By the end of the day, the police chief of Kabul had been fired, an official acknowledgment that security efforts were not working.

Mohammed Arif Rahmani, a member of the Afghan Parliament's security committee, said the Taliban had been emboldened since striking an agreement with the United States in February that began the withdrawal of American forces and largely ended the use of U.S. air power crucial to keeping the insurgents at bay.

A residential area of Kabul was targeted by a rocket attack last week. Haroon Sabawoon/Anadolu Agency, via Getty Images

But with repeated delays in the next steps of the peace process — a cease-fire and direct negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government — the Taliban have turned to smaller-scale operations meant to show a presence deep inside the capital and wide around it.

On important occasions, such as the presidential inauguration in March and independence day last week, barrages of mortar shells have landed at the heart of the city.

“They have used the time since to increase their resources and complete the ring of siege around the city,” Mr. Rahmani said.

While the Taliban were working to strengthen their hand in the negotiations, Mr. Rahmani said he was far more worried that the Afghan government appeared unable to do much in the face of the Taliban threats.

Direct negotiations were expected in March, according to the U.S.-Taliban deal, but the start has been delayed by disagreements over the swap of 5,000 Taliban prisoners for 1,000 Afghan security forces. The Afghan government initially opposed the plan, saying that they had played no part in the negotiations, but conceded after much pressure from the Trump administration.

The Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, said in early August that the government would free the last 400 prisoners, removing the final hurdle to the talks. The Taliban said they would sit down for direct negotiations within three days of the release of the last prisoner.

But in the two weeks since, only 80 prisoners have been released. Afghan officials said France and Australia had opposed the release of several prisoners accused in attacks that killed their citizens. Hamdullah Mohib, the Afghan national security adviser, said the remaining prisoners would be released after the Taliban freed a number of Afghan pilots and commandos.

Taliban prisoners at Bagram military base in Afghanistan before their release in May. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Meanwhile, the Taliban continue to project strength through brutal violence around the country and increased activity in and around the capital.

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Afghan officials acknowledge that in districts surrounding the capital the Taliban have a small presence to carry out hit-and-run attacks. Reports of government employees being targeted in outlying districts are an almost daily occurrence.

One Afghan security official said that an overlap between criminal networks and the insurgency inside the city and the surrounding districts had made security forces’ jobs especially difficult. The cooperation gives the Taliban not only a wider reach, but also cover to stock explosives around the city. The lack of proper addresses or identification cards in the capital makes it that much more difficult to pin down networks.

The Taliban have long had a quiet presence in the districts to the south and southeast of Kabul, in particular targeting government vehicles in Surobi, a district on the main highway that connects the capital to the east. But in recent months they have become more open about their presence, frequently coercing families to cut ties with the government, pull their sons from any government service, and provide food and money to the insurgents.

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**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

"The Taliban go to people and ask them for food, and no one can say no," said Shinkay Karokhel, a member of Parliament with constituents in Surobi. "If people say they don't have enough food, the Taliban ask them to butcher their animals and feed them."

The insurgents have also increased their presence in districts north of Kabul, forcing many government employees to move their families. The Taliban are reinforcing positions that are only temporarily dismantled by commando operations. They return once elite forces, stretched by spiraling violence across the country, are distracted elsewhere.

A checkpoint in Kabul. An overlap between criminal networks and the insurgency has made the security forces' job more difficult. Wakil Kohsar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Officials and residents in Shakardara, a district about 20 miles north of Kabul, said in interviews that they were particularly concerned how easily a small group proclaiming themselves the Taliban had established a foothold in the district.

One former Afghan Army soldier accused of helping insurgents in the south returned home and gathered a band of about 10 men around him. He began threatening his own brothers to abandon the army. More insurgents joined the group after it carried out its first major attack: targeting the convoy of the Kabul governor, who was visiting his garden in the district, and killing one of his bodyguards.

After that attack, hundreds of Afghan commandos carried out a two-day operation in Shakardara, arresting 37 people, according to one local commander. But once the commandos left the area, the Taliban who had retreated made their way back.

Atiqullah Amarkhel, a retired Afghan general who saw the Soviet-backed regime fall to an insurgent group that slowly encircled Kabul, said that what worried him was that the Afghan government was so divided that coalition partners could not seem to agree on anything, even the leadership of a council that is supposed to be overseeing talks with the Taliban.

Mr. Amarkhel said that, as in the 1990s, the current government's disunity was allowing the insurgents to gain strength.

"I see that history repeating itself," he said.

Fahim Abed contributed reporting.