

President Biden condemns terrorist attack and vows to hunt down those responsible.



By Michael D. Shear

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President Biden on Thursday denounced a terrorist attack at the Kabul airport that killed at least 13 American service members and injured 18 more, saying that the frantic evacuation of U.S. citizens and allies from Afghanistan will continue even as he pledged to hunt down those responsible for the attacks.

Mr. Biden spoke after the U.S. military sustained one of its highest single-day American tolls during its 20-year Afghanistan campaign.

“To those who carried out this attack, as well as anyone who wishes America harm, know this: We will not forgive,” the president said. “We will not forget. We will hunt you down and make you pay.”

The bombs were set off near a crowd of families at the airport gates who were desperately hoping to make one of the last evacuation flights out. Gunfire was reported in the aftermath of the explosions.

Mr. Biden said he had asked his commanders to find ways to target ISIS-K, the Afghan affiliate of the Islamic State, which claimed responsibility for the attacks earlier in the day on behalf of its loyalists in Afghanistan.

He vowed the United States would respond with force at “a moment of our choosing,” echoing President Bush’s remarks days after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

“This conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others; it will end in a way and at an hour of our choosing,” Mr. Bush said, weeks before the U.S. military began fighting in Afghanistan.

Mr. Biden spoke from the East Room of the White House shortly after the Pentagon confirmed the deaths of the American service members in what officials said were suicide bomber attacks.

“These American service members who gave their lives,” Mr. Biden said, were “heroes who have been engaged in a dangerous, selfless mission to save the lives of others.”

He called Thursday “a tough day” and pledged that the United States would uphold its “sacred obligation” to the families of the fallen.

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The night before the attack, a senior U.S. official warned of a “specific” and “credible” threat at the airport by an affiliate of the Islamic State — the Islamic State Khorasan, or ISIS-K — and Western governments began urging people to leave the area.

Even with such a specific warning, military officials said, it would be very difficult to pick out a suicide bomber with a concealed explosive vest in a huge throng of people, like that at the airport.

The troops who died Thursday were the first American service members killed in Afghanistan since February 2020. For the U.S. military, it was a day with more deaths than any other since 2011.

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Those deaths were just the kind of military loss Mr. Biden has repeatedly said he was trying to avoid by ending America's 20-year war in the country.

Acting against the advice of his generals and overruling some of his top foreign policy advisers, Mr. Biden made the decision in April that he could not ask more American troops — or their families — to sacrifice themselves for a war that he no longer believed was in the best interests of the United States or its allies.

The president has said that he did not want to call the parents of another Marine, soldier or airman killed in action in Afghanistan.

But the rapid takeover of the country by the Taliban caught the administration off-guard and set in motion a chaotic evacuation in which 6,000 American troops attempted to secure the Kabul airport against the Taliban and terror groups. Earlier this week, Mr. Biden rejected calls from lawmakers, activists and other world leaders to extend the American presence at the airport past Aug. 31, citing the potential for terrorist attacks.

Last Friday, as he pledged to evacuate all Americans and Afghan allies who wanted to leave the country, Mr. Biden vowed that “any attack on our forces or disruption of our operations at the airport will be met with a swift and forceful response.”

It was unclear on Thursday whether a military response of any kind was already in the works, or whether the U.S. troops on the ground had the capacity to strike back while also securing the airport.

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