

Afghan Vice President, Staunch Opponent of Taliban, Survives Blast

At least 10 bystanders were killed in the attack in Kabul, the second in just over a year aimed at the senior vice president, Amrullah Saleh.



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KABUL, Afghanistan — Amrullah Saleh, Afghanistan's senior vice president and a staunch opponent of the Taliban, survived a bombing that targeted his convoy in the capital on Wednesday, the second deadly attack against him in a little over a year.

At least 10 bystanders were killed and 15 other people were wounded by a bomb that had been planted on the side of the road, Afghanistan's interior ministry said. Photos from the blast site, a crowded roundabout in Kabul with mechanic shops and crockery stores, showed vast carnage.

Rizwan Murad, a spokesman for Mr. Saleh, said "two or three" of the vice president's guards had been wounded.

Mr. Saleh, a former spy chief who became one of the country's two vice presidents early this year, appeared shaken in a video message from his office about two hours after the attack, his right hand bandaged. He said he and his son Ebadullah, a college student who was with him in the car as he headed to work in the morning rush hour, had suffered slight burns.

"My hand is wounded, as the explosion wave was strong and the car window melted," Mr. Saleh said. "The situation that has come on me today comes on our security forces every day, every hour."



Mr. Saleh, left, at a ceremony in Kabul on Tuesday in honor of Ahmad Shah Massoud, who resisted Taliban rule until his assassination in 2001. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The Taliban denied that they were behind the blast, and no group immediately claimed responsibility.

The insurgents signed a deal with the United States in February on a withdrawal of American troops, with the understanding that the Taliban would stop bombing urban centers. But Afghan officials say they have continued to carry out attacks without claiming responsibility for them, exploiting a complicated situation in which violence is also perpetrated by an Islamic State offshoot, as well as organized crime gangs.

In July of last year, just hours after Mr. Saleh declared his candidacy for the vice presidency, he barely survived an attack on his office that killed about 20 of his closest aides, including family members. A squad of suicide bombers first set off a car bomb outside, then fought their way up the stairs to the fourth-floor office where Mr. Saleh was holding meetings. They gunned down many of his aides and guests; after hours of fighting, Mr. Saleh managed to escape by climbing a ladder to a neighbor's roof.

The blast targeting Mr. Saleh on Wednesday came as final preparations were underway in Doha, the capital of Qatar, for direct negotiations between the Taliban and a group of government and opposition officials on ending the war in Afghanistan, which in some shape or form has dragged on for more than 40 years. The talks were originally expected to begin soon after the February deal between the United States and the Taliban, but they have been delayed for months because of disagreements over a prisoner swap.

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The government has been reluctant to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners in return for 1,000 members of its security forces, an agreement that the insurgents reached with United States in talks that did not include the Afghan government. But after much pressure from the Trump administration over the past six months, the prisoner swap is nearly complete, removing the final hurdle to the upcoming talks.



Security personnel carried a body from the scene of the attack in Kabul on Wednesday. Jawad Jalali/EPA, via Shutterstock

Details are being sorted out regarding the last batch of prisoners, about a half-dozen men who were convicted of attacks on troops from France, Australia and the United States. Because all three countries oppose their release — including the United States, despite its overall push for the release of Taliban prisoners — they will be sent to Qatar under a form of house arrest so the talks can begin.

Mr. Saleh is seen as a close adviser and confidant of President Ashraf Ghani, playing a central role in strategizing for the Taliban talks and negotiating with the United States as it tries to phase out its expensive involvement in Afghanistan.

Mr. Ghani, who secured a second term in office early this year in a disputed election, has been accused of trying to delay the talks with the Taliban, even as his government's authority wanes in the face of an insurgency emboldened by its deal with the United States.

The insurgents have tightened their grip on Afghanistan's highways and are accused of carrying out a wave of assassinations in Kabul to increase pressure on the government. On Tuesday, the Taliban carried out their first large-scale attack in nearly two decades in the northern province of Panjshir, which was the hub of resistance to the group when it controlled about 90 percent of Afghan territory in the 1990s.



Workers cleared debris after the explosion. Rahmat Gul/Associated Press

The attack on Panjshir, which is Mr. Saleh's home province, came 19 years to the day after the death of Ahmad Shah Massoud, a politician and guerrilla commander who had led the resistance to the Taliban there. Mr. Massoud was killed by two Al Qaeda suicide bombers posing as journalists, two days before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

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.

Mr. Saleh is hawkish in his opposition to the Taliban, describing them primarily as a proxy for the military of neighboring Pakistan, which has served as a haven for much of the group's senior leadership.

As vice president, he has sometimes toned down his opposition to the group, drawing a line between his public responsibility and his personal views. But he has said that any deal with the Taliban should absorb them into the existing democratic system, rejecting anything that resembles a return to their time in power, when they ruled with an iron fist and banned women from public life.

"As the vice president, I don't want to get in the way of peace," Mr. Saleh said last week in an interview with the Afghan channel ToloNews. "But as Amrullah Saleh, the individual, and with the past and ideology that I have, I am irreconcilable with the Taliban. It's not possible for us to make peace, to work together."



Mr. Saleh's vehicle being taken away from the scene. Jawad Jalali/EPA, via Shutterstock

Fahim Abed contributed reporting.