

From Maternity Ward to Cemetery, a Morning of Murder in Afghanistan

Afghans don't need a reminder that no one is safe from the country's endless war, but they got one anyway on Tuesday.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The morning was not yet over, but already it felt as if the very cycle of life in Afghanistan was under assault, with attacks at a maternity ward and a funeral serving as grim reminders that its people are in peril from cradle to grave.

First, three militants stormed a hospital in Kabul soon after 10 a.m. on Tuesday, shooting new mothers dead before the newborns in their arms had even seen the light outside the hospital. At least 15 people were killed inside the hospital — mothers, babies, medical workers, and one police officer.

As security forces were scrambling in Kabul, about a hundred miles to the east, in the province of Nangarhar, a suicide bomber walked into the funeral for a local police commander. As hundreds of locals queued in front of the body for the final prayer, the bomber detonated his explosives not far from the corpse.

The commander, 59, who had survived many battles and attacks, had died of a heart attack. Now his body was riddled with shrapnel, too. The explosion killed at least 25 and wounded 68 others.



Women, many of them carrying babies, outside the back gate of the clinic after being rescued. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Violent death here is so frequent, and so scattered, that an accurate count is an impossible task. But by dusk on Tuesday, when the reported deaths of the day from all sides had been tallied, the Afghan war had most likely taken 100 lives.

Of course, the night brings more death — and the next day more tallying.

What is crushing Afghans is not just the sheer brutality of the attacks with newborn babies soaked in blood and deprived of mothers before they have even gotten a name, but the failure of anything to bring a reprieve.

The United States and the Taliban signed a preliminary peace agreement in February that was supposed to have brought the two-decade war closer to an end. Instead, the insurgents have only cranked up attacks around the country, inflicting heavy casualties on Afghan forces with dozens killed every day.

The peace deal has been stuck in a prisoner exchange that was supposed to unlock direct negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban to plan for power-sharing after the United States withdraws its remaining troops. The Taliban are insisting on the release of up to 5,000 of their prisoners before considering any other moves.

An Afghan group affiliated with the Islamic State has claimed responsibility for attacking the funeral. But no group has claimed responsibility for attacking the hospital. The Taliban, in a statement, denied that they were behind it. But coming after weeks of intensifying Taliban attacks, the government blamed the group.



Afghans, some who with relatives inside the clinic, waiting for news outside the building. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

And in a sign that any momentum toward peace was dissipating, President Ashraf Ghani ordered Afghan forces to abandon the “active defense” posture they had been in since the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement and return to offensive attacks against the insurgents.

“The Taliban, with the stoking of foreigners, have intensified the war and are shedding Afghan blood,” Mr. Ghani said in an address to the nation at the end of the bloody day. “Don’t see our invitation for peace and a cease-fire as our weakness, but as deep respect to the demand and will of the people.”

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Deborah Lyons, the head of the U.N. mission in Afghanistan, condemned the hospital assault. “Who attacks newborn babies and new mothers? Who does this?” she said on Twitter. “The most innocent of innocents, a baby! Why? Cruelty has no followers from humanity.”

The insurgents have refused even calls for a humanitarian cease-fire to allow the country to combat the rapidly spreading coronavirus, a call Mr. Ghani repeated in his address. Afghanistan has officially recorded about 5,000 cases of Covid-19, but officials warn that the spread is most likely much wider.

Between the daily toll of the war and the virus, the country’s health resources are stretched thin. With 80 percent of the population living just barely above the poverty line, there is fear that the economic shock waves of the pandemic could bring starvation.

On Tuesday, the health system itself came into the cross-hairs.

“Today, my doctor, my medical personnel, the poor mother who is in labor, are left in chaos — the doctor that is there to rescue her is covered in blood and falls next to her bed,” said Wahid Majrooh, the deputy minister of health.

The attack in Kabul, the capital, targeted a 100-bed hospital in the western part of the city, a largely Shiite area often hit by Islamic State bombers.

The hospital is known for its large maternity ward, which is supported by Doctors Without Borders. During the five-hour operation to kill the three assailants, Afghan special forces were seen rescuing newborn babies. NATO troops were also seen at the site.



A couple and their baby were reunited after the mother and child were rescued. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Crowds gathered outside the hospital and emotions ran high as they saw babies soaked in blood. A security official coming out of the hospital showed reporters pictures of the devastation inside the ward: mothers shot as they had tried to hide under a bed, a female nurse prostrate in blood, one woman still clinging to her newborn.

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.

“She was dead, but the baby was alive,” the official said.

The relatives of one woman who had given birth at dawn were trying to get news. The woman’s brother wailed and twisted in pain as other relatives tried to calm him. “Oh, God, oh God,” was all he could say as he kept crying.

“She had given birth already when the suicide bombers entered,” said Rafiullah, the woman’s brother in law.

A community elder came out of the hospital with a list of a dozen newborns who had been evacuated to other hospitals. As he read the names of their mothers — these had been written on pieces of tape on the babies’ stomachs, he said — and the names of the hospitals the babies had been sent to, a man from the anxious crowd asked about the mothers.

“Fifteen martyred mothers,” said the community elder, Abdul Hadi. “Their bodies are in the ambulances being evacuated now. We put them in body bags.”

The bombing in Nangarhar Province targeted the funeral of Sheikh Akram, a local police commander. About 500 people had gathered at a large field in Khewa district for the final prayer, and a grave had been dug for him just across the road.

Naeem Jan Naeem, an eyewitness, said the imam had just asked people to line up and announced the beginning of the prayer when a huge blast was heard and a fire erupted in the front of the crowd.

“The body of Sheikh Akram was close to the explosion,” Mr. Naeem said. “There was shooting after the explosion, too — his face and his chest had shrapnel wounds.

“His body was wounded after he had died.”

Najim Rahim contributed reporting from Kabul, and Zabihullah Ghazi from Jalalabad.