

Terror Attack Strikes Afghan Capital as Another City Is Locked Down for Coronavirus

The war rages even as coronavirus spreads, with the latest attack killing at least 25 at a Sikh temple in Kabul.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Militants stormed a crowded Sikh temple and housing complex in Kabul on Wednesday, killing at least 25 people in a six-hour siege just as war-ravaged Afghanistan is starting to struggle with the global coronavirus contagion.

The attackers, believed to be Islamic State extremists, struck on a day when nationwide cases of the virus nearly doubled from 24 hours earlier. Officials feared the actual spread is even wider.

The western city of Herat, with roughly 4 million residents, reported 58 positive cases and was put under lockdown. The area shares a porous border with Iran, where the contagion has been especially severe.

After the attack in Kabul, the police cordoned off the area and special forces officers wore protective masks to guard against coronavirus infection.

The attack began when a heavily armed militant entered a complex that houses dozens of families from the Sikh religious minority and contains a temple.

Ahmad Tariq Arian, the Interior Ministry spokesman, said that eight civilians were wounded and 80 hostages were rescued. Photos provided by security officials showed a large number of crying children among the civilians rescued.

Anarkali Kaur Honaryar, a member of the Afghan Senate who had been inside the complex helping load bodies into ambulances, said only one of those killed was a Muslim, who was guarding the temple. The rest were Sikhs, she said, including several women and one child.

Islamic State loyalists claimed responsibility for the attack, according to the Site Intelligence Group, which monitors militant media sites. Once waging frequent deadly attacks against vulnerable targets in Afghanistan's urban centers, the Islamic State has shrunk in size because of sustained military operations by Afghan and American forces as well as hostility from Taliban insurgents, who view Islamic State militants as trespassers on their turf.

Hindus and Sikhs, once numbering in the hundreds of thousands in the country, are oppressed minorities who have been frequently attacked in recent years. Only a couple hundred Hindu and Sikh families remain in Afghanistan, with the rest migrating to India or the West over the past four decades.

Most attacks around the country are waged by the Taliban, who continue to embrace violence as leverage despite signing a peace deal with the United States that has been expected to lower the bloodshed in Afghanistan as the parties continue negotiations for a political settlement.

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The peace process is hamstrung by disagreements between the Taliban and the Afghan government over a plan to exchange prisoners, a step meant to advance efforts to establish a power-sharing government among the Afghan sides. On Wednesday, negotiations took place via video conference to try to resolve the issue.

Still, the Taliban is continuing its deadly assaults, while Afghan security forces remain largely on the defensive in the hopes of encouraging the Taliban to cease their fire. On Wednesday, a vehicle carrying civilians was blown up by a roadside bomb in the Musa Qala district of southern Helmand Province, killing eight people, including children, local officials said.

Over the past week, just as the authorities warned that the spread of coronavirus in the country had become alarming and could infect millions, violence appeared to have intensified. In about a dozen provinces with coronavirus cases, the Taliban have launched more than 300 attacks over the past week, according to a Western military official who requested anonymity to share sensitive data.

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.

In Herat province, identified as the epicenter of the virus in Afghanistan, the insurgents carried out about 40 attacks in the past week. At least five provinces with positive cases of coronavirus suffered 30 attacks or more in the past week.

An incomplete tally by The New York Times showed at least 40 attacks of the past week were deadly, with nearly 100 security force members and civilians killed in Taliban assaults. Two airstrikes by Afghan security forces — launched in response to Taliban attacks in Kunduz province — killed at least 14 civilians.

Herat's lockdown was ordered after 32 new cases of coronavirus had been confirmed on Tuesday. Most of the city's shops remained closed, and the streets deserted. Security forces were deployed to prevent gatherings of even small groups.

The Taliban have promised international aid groups and health organizations access to Taliban-controlled areas and cooperation to tackle the coronavirus outbreak. But many diplomats and officials have insisted on a cease-fire, saying the catastrophic consequences of the virus's spread can only be prevented if all resources are focused on the health emergency rather than the war.

The United Nations mission in Afghanistan, echoing a global call by the U.N. secretary general made on Monday, asked Afghan parties to reduce violence and work toward a cease-fire so they could tackle “the looming health crisis posed by Covid-19,” the disease caused by the virus.

“The fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war,” said the secretary general, António Guterres. “End the sickness of war and fight the disease that is ravaging our world. It starts by stopping the fighting everywhere. Now.”

Reporting was contributed by Najim Rahim from Kabul, Assadullah Timory from Herat, and Taimoor Shah from Kandahar, Afghanistan.