

## ***Attack in Afghanistan Kills 10 From Charity That Clears Land Mines***

The government blamed the Taliban for the attack on the British-American charity, the HALO Trust. The militant group denied any responsibility.

**By Najim Rahim and Mike Ives**

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KABUL, Afghanistan — At least 10 people were killed and 16 others wounded in an armed attack on staff members of a British-American charity in Afghanistan that has been clearing land mines in the country for decades, officials said on Wednesday.

The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack, according to the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors announcements by the terrorist organization. The assault occurred late Tuesday at a demining camp in the northeastern province of Baghlan and targeted employees of the charity, the HALO Trust.

Tariq Arian, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry, said that the victims were all Afghan citizens and that the wounded had been transferred to hospitals.

The HALO Trust, a British charity with an American affiliate registered in Washington, said in a statement on Wednesday that an “unknown armed group” entered the demining camp at 9:50 p.m. on Tuesday and opened fire on about 110 men from local communities who had been working in nearby minefields. “We strongly condemn the attack on our staff, who were carrying out humanitarian work to save lives,” it said.

Jawid Mazlomyar, 30, who has worked with HALO for more than a decade, described the bloody and chaotic scene that unfolded around him in Baghlan. He said that the armed attackers had rounded up those in the demining camp and cut off the power before ransacking the occupants’ belongings and taking their cellphones and money.

“They were screaming and insulting us and saying, ‘Who is your manager? Tell us, otherwise we are killing you,’” Mr. Mazlomyar said.

Then, consistent with previous attacks by the Islamic State in Afghanistan, the attackers asked who among those in the camp were Hazaras, a persecuted, largely Shiite minority in the country. Last month, the Islamic State was accused of attacking a primarily Hazara school in Kabul, the capital, killing more than 80 people, most of them teenage girls.

“We told them that we are Muslim and every day we are praying,” Mr. Mazlomyar said. “They asked again, and we responded that there is no Hazara and we all are Muslims. At that time, they started firing.”

Mr. Mazlomyar added that, in the end, the attackers did not single anyone out.

“They killed everyone,” he said.

Mr. Arian, the spokesman, initially blamed the Taliban for the attack.

Zabihullah Mujahid, a spokesman for the Taliban, denied any involvement and said that the area where the “horrificing” attack had taken place was not under the militant group’s control.

“We condemn attacks on the defenseless & view it as brutality,” he said on Twitter. “We have normal relations with NGOs, our Mujahidin will never carry out such brutal acts.”

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In civilian attacks such as Tuesday’s, Afghan government officials often opt to blame the Taliban regardless of the killers’ possible affiliation with other armed groups. The move is strategic: to highlight the government’s continuing struggle against the insurgents as the United States and international forces leave Afghanistan in the coming weeks, and to spotlight the Taliban’s bloody tactics.

Tolo News, a news network in Afghanistan, published footage on Twitter that it said showed people wounded in the attack being taken on stretchers to a public hospital in Pul-e-Khumri, a city about 140 miles north of Kabul, the capital.

Ramiz Alakbarov, the United Nations secretary general’s deputy special representative for Afghanistan, called for an investigation into the attack and described it as “heinous.”

“It is repugnant that an organization that works to clear land mines and other explosives and better the lives of vulnerable people could be targeted,” he said in a statement.

## **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.

The HALO Trust began working in Afghanistan in 1988. Its field teams clear land mines, dispose of unexploded ordnance found in bombs and bullets, and build facilities to store guns and other weapons safely. The group has programs in 26 countries and territories, including in Iraq, where it began working in 2018.

The HALO program in Afghanistan, which started months before the Soviet Army pulled out of the country in 1989, employs more than 2,600 local staff members and remains the group’s largest operation in the world. HALO says on its website that over the past 30 years, it has worked with the Afghan government to make nearly 80 percent of the country’s recorded minefields and battlefields safe.

Still, the group says, an area of Afghanistan as large as Chicago still needs to be cleared.

Diana, Princess of Wales, called attention to HALO’s work in 1997, when she walked through a live minefield in Angola — once home to one of the most heated Cold War conflicts in Africa — to highlight the danger of mines around the world.

Diana’s youngest son, Prince Harry, retraced her steps in 2019 during a trip through the continent with his wife, Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, and their son. HALO said at the time that it had cleared about 100,000 mines in Angola since Diana’s visit.

Baghlan Province is one of the places where the Taliban have been attacking in recent weeks as they have seized control of territory and military outposts in several parts of the country. One attack on a security depot there in late May killed eight territorial

army soldiers and wounded 10 others.

The Taliban's advances coincide with the withdrawal of United States troops and their NATO allies from the country, a process that is expected to end by early to mid-July. Officials in the Biden administration, which is eager to prevent the country's cities from falling to the Taliban, are debating whether American warplanes should provide air support to Afghan forces.

Washington's peace envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, finished a four-day visit to Kabul on Tuesday. Mr. Khalilzad is an Afghan-born American diplomat who led negotiations ahead of the Trump administration's February 2020 peace deal with the Taliban, which laid out the conditions and timeline for the American withdrawal.

The U.S. Embassy in Kabul said in a statement on Wednesday that American leaders met their Afghan counterparts in the city this week and "agreed that maintaining political unity was essential during this period of transition."

Najim Rahim reported from Kabul, Afghanistan, and Mike Ives from Hong Kong. Fatima Faizi contributed reporting from Kabul, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff from Geneva.