

Gunmen Storm Kabul University, Killing at Least 19

The siege lasted six hours as Afghan forces and U.S. commandos hunted and killed three gunmen. An Afghan branch of the Islamic State was reported to have claimed responsibility.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Three gunmen laid siege to Afghanistan's largest university on Monday, taking hostages, killing at least 19 people and wounding more than a dozen, officials said. It was the second deadly assault with mass casualties on an education center in the capital in just over a week.

The three assailants were killed after Afghan security forces and American troops moved to root them out, ending the siege after six hours, the Interior Ministry said.

At least one senior Afghan official blamed the Taliban, but the insurgent group denied responsibility and said the Islamic State had carried out the assault, which shattered the sanctity of the campus on a warm fall day.

The SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors online messaging of extremist groups, said later that an Afghanistan branch of the Islamic State had claimed responsibility in a statement that referred only to two attackers and described the targets as “graduate judges and investigators belonging to the apostate Afghan government.”

The gunmen quickly spread out over the university grounds, detonating explosives and firing weapons. Video and photographs posted to social media showed students scrambling for cover and clambering over walls to get to safety. Sporadic gunshots echoed in the background. Several photos showed wanton carnage in at least one classroom, with shattered glass and blood-spattered notebooks scattered across the floor.

Fardin Ahmadi, a social science student, said he was stuck in his classroom for two hours, until Afghan forces evacuated him and several others. “The situation was very bad,” Mr. Ahmadi said. “Every single student wanted to save their own life; we had forgotten about anything else.”

Four hours into the assault, the attackers were still barricading themselves in classrooms.



A man wounded after gunmen stormed the university on Monday. Wakil Kohsar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Obaidullah Meraj, a doctor at the Ali Abad hospital, said that ambulances had transferred several wounded people, including students and professors from the university. More than 20 students and faculty members were held hostage at one point during the siege.

“During the attack on Kabul University, unfortunately, 19 were killed and 22 others were wounded,” said Tariq Arian, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry. By 5 p.m. roughly six hours after the attack began, he said, the three gunmen who carried out the assault had been killed.

The attack — the latest sign that spiraling violence in the Afghan countryside has made its way to the capital — followed a suicide bombing on Oct. 24 at an educational center in western Kabul. More than 40 people, most of them high school students from the Shiite Hazara ethnic minority, died in the attack, for which the Islamic State claimed responsibility.

Kabul University lifted its coronavirus restrictions in recent months, and thousands of students were most likely on campus at the time of the attack, spread among classrooms, dorms and a book exhibition highlighting authors from Afghanistan and Iran.

As the magnitude of the casualties became clearer, faculty members expressed shock.

“I am devastated. I am destroyed,” Sami Mahdi, a lecturer at the university and bureau chief of Radio Azadi, the Afghan branch of Radio Free Europe, wrote in a Twitter post after visiting victims in the hospital. “Some of our best students are gone forever.”

Amrullah Saleh, Afghanistan’s senior vice president, accused Taliban operatives of the assault in a Twitter post, saying they would never be able to “wash their Conscience of this stinking & non justifiable attack.”

But a Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, denounced the assault in a statement, denying responsibility and accusing the Islamic State of having carried it out. He also accused the Afghan government of having allowed the Islamic State to harbor in the country.

In 2018, a suicide bombing that killed dozens, claimed by the Islamic State, took place near Kabul University. In 2016, the Taliban attacked the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul, killing at least 13.



Afghan police officers arriving at the university. Video and photographs posted to social media showed students scrambling for cover and clambering over walls to get to safety during the attack. Rahmat Gul/Associated Press

The Islamic State has staged numerous high-profile attacks in Kabul in recent years, often striking government postings and Shiite Muslims at schools, places of worship and other easily infiltrated — or “soft” — targets.

Over the past three years, concerted U.S. and Afghan military campaigns beat back the Islamic State’s offshoot in Afghanistan, hemming in what remained of the extremists in the country’s mountainous east. But the group still maintains capable terrorist cells in cities like Kabul, protected by secure messaging apps and careful communication with outside leadership.

Islamic State tactics have often mimicked those introduced by the Taliban, especially the Haqqani network, a group known for its ruthlessness, criminal networks and close ties to Al Qaeda.

But after the February agreement between the Taliban and the United States over the drawdown of American troops, the Taliban reduced attacks on cities, replacing them with targeted killings that go unclaimed and offensives in the country’s rural areas.

The attack on the university followed the deadliest month in Afghanistan for civilians since September 2019, according to data compiled by The New York Times. At least 212 people were killed in October, and, according to recently released United Nations data, about 2,100 Afghan civilians died and 3,800 were wounded in the first nine months of the year.

After the February agreement, the Taliban and the Afghan government began direct negotiations in September. But any hope of a quick resolution to the conflict has since faded, with negotiators from both sides still deadlocked in preliminary discussions on the rules and regulations that will govern future negotiations.

Najim Rahim contributed reporting from Kabul, and Eric Schmitt from Washington.