

Clinic Bombed as Afghan Forces Fend Off Taliban Attack on Kunduz

Airstrikes destroyed much of a health center after the militants again attacked the northern city, which they have repeatedly overrun.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — In a day of intensifying violence across Afghanistan, the country's security forces bombed a clinic in the northern province of Kunduz on Tuesday in their efforts to thwart another coordinated assault by the Taliban on the provincial capital that the militants have twice overrun and continue to besiege.

The country's conflict is back into full-fledged bloodletting after a brief period of hope that a deal between the United States and the Taliban in February would open the way for negotiations between the two Afghan sides.

The Taliban have ignored what U.S. officials describe as an understanding that they would reduce violence by up to 80 percent in the prelude to negotiations over a power-sharing agreement. Fighting was reported in 20 of the country's 34 provinces over the past 24 hours, a senior Afghan official said.

After a series of bloody attacks by the Taliban in recent weeks, President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan last week ordered his forces, which had remained on "active defense," to go back on offense.

That change of posture by the government gave the Taliban the excuse to do away with any pretense of restraint and further ramp up attacks, particularly around cities they had largely avoided in recent months.

And with the U.S.-Taliban deal constraining how much support the United States can offer the Afghan government in offensive operations against the militants, the security forces are limited in how much they can do.

Overnight, insurgents attacked the security belt around the city of Kunduz from several directions, assaulting at least 17 outposts and bases of the Afghan forces, said Lt. Col. Mashooq Kohistani, commander of an Afghan Army battalion in Kunduz. Colonel Kohistani said that all the attacks had been fended off, but that fighting was continuing in one suburb of the city.



After a series of bloody attacks in recent weeks, President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan ordered his forces to go back on offense last week, after a series of bloody attacks, including an attack on a maternity ward in Kabul earlier this month. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Asadullah Khalid, Afghanistan's defense minister, traveled to Kunduz for the operations and put Taliban fatalities at more than 50. He said eight members of the Afghan security force had been killed.

Ihsanullah Fazli, the provincial director of health in Kunduz, said that the clinic in the district of Chardara had been bombed and that several parts of it, including its ambulances, had been destroyed.

“We have some wounded among our personnel and patients, but we do not have any deaths,” Mr. Fazli said.

Abdul Wali, a nurse at the clinic who sustained wounds in his legs and arms, said about 50 people had been at the clinic at the time of the bombing.

“The Taliban brought their fighters for treatment, but there were civilians there, too,” Mr. Wali said. “The doors, the guard rooms, were struck. Our emergency section is destroyed.”

Mr. Wali and others who were wounded were taken to the main regional hospital in Kunduz, a city that has been overwhelmed by the spread of the coronavirus. Dozens of hospital staff members have been quarantined.

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Fawad Aman, a spokesman for the Afghan Defense Ministry, denied that a clinic had been struck. But internal security communications in Kunduz, viewed by The New York Times, showed that A-29 attack aircraft of the Afghan Air Force had struck what the messages described as “a center for treatment of wounded Taliban in Chardara district.”

Although the area is heavily contested by the Taliban, the clinic is run by the Afghan government through an arrangement practiced in many volatile parts of the country, in which a nongovernmental organization is subcontracted to provide basic services.



Afghan security forces standing guard at an Afghan National Army outpost in Kunduz Province after a Taliban attack last month. Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Dr. Majeed Mohsen, an official at Just for Afghan Capacity and Knowledge, the NGO that runs the clinic in Chardara, said the center was established 10 years ago. In addition to treating war wounded, it had eight staff members providing basic health care, including maternity services and immunizations, as well as care for malnourished children. The clinic saw as many as 80 patients a day, Dr. Mohsen said.

In 2015, the first time the Taliban overran the city of Kunduz, the United States bombed a Doctors Without Borders hospital, killing at least 40 people.

The Taliban attack on Kunduz comes in a province whose leadership is in disarray.

The governor has resigned, citing illness, and his farewell on Tuesday was disrupted by a mortar that landed at his compound just as guests were leaving.

A day earlier, his deputy — now the acting governor — tested positive for Covid-19, according to local news reports. But he still appeared in meetings on Tuesday, including with all the senior security officials leading the response to the Taliban attack, standing next to the minister of defense without wearing a mask.

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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.

As the violence in Afghanistan was intensifying, top American officials were in Doha, Qatar, on Tuesday to meet with Taliban representatives and push them to respect the deal and negotiate with the Afghan government. Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. envoy for Afghan peace, was accompanied on the trip by the top American commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Austin S. Miller, officials said.



The United States negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad, left, and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a founding leader of the Taliban, signing the peace agreement in Doha, Qatar, in February. Hussein Sayed/Associated Press

As the two Afghan sides locked horns in another spring of bloodshed, the United Nations pointed to a rise in civilian casualties in the month of April. The Taliban were reported responsible for 208 civilian casualties, a 25 percent increase over the same period last year. The Afghan forces were blamed for 172 civilian casualties, an increase of 38 percent.

On Monday, the Taliban killed nine members of the security forces and wounded 20 others after ramming a Humvee full of explosives into a base of the Afghan intelligence agency in Ghazni Province.

In Kandahar, the insurgents — with help of infiltrators — attacked a security base and killed 12 police officers.

Given the rise in Taliban attacks, the Afghan government was forced to adopt an offensive strategy, said Arif Rahmani, a member of the Afghan Parliament's security committee,

“Mr. Ghani was forced to announce offensive operations because of the public pressure,” Mr. Rahmani said. “The Taliban have reached a high level of self-confidence after signing the deal with the U.S. They are not showing any faith in ending the current war. They are dreaming of returning to their Emirate.”

But Atiqullah Amarkhel, a retired general and military analyst, said Mr. Ghani's declaration of offensive operations without the backing of American air support — which the deal limits to only when Afghan forces are under attack — means not much will change in the battlefield reality, other than Afghan troops becoming more vulnerable.

The Afghan Air Force is still nascent, and there is concern about whether its targeting is accurate enough to avoid civilian casualties, given the force's limited access to the more precise weapons used by American aircraft.

“Such an announcement has no military logic,” Mr. Amarkhel said. “Announcing an offensive operation when there is already a deal between the U.S. and the Taliban, and no support from the U.S. and NATO, will bring nothing. The security forces will only suffer casualties.

“They won’t be able to suppress the Taliban, but it will give an excuse for their violence.”

Thomas Gibbons-Neff contributed reporting from Washington.