

Ahead of Eid celebrations, Taliban rockets explode near Afghanistan's presidential palace

21/08/2018 08:28 by admin

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An MD 530F military helicopter targets a house where attackers are hiding in Kabul, Afghanistan, Tuesday, Aug. 21, 2018. The Taliban fired rockets toward the presidential palace in Kabul Tuesday as President Ashraf Ghani was giving his holiday message for Eid celebrations. (Photo: AP)

Kabul: The Taliban fired a pair of rockets Tuesday toward the presidential palace in Kabul as the Afghan president was delivering his holiday message for the Muslim celebrations of Eid al-Adha, police said, prompting a ferocious aerial response with helicopter gunships bombing the house from where the rockets were reportedly launched.

The first rocket landed somewhere near the presidency building while the second hit near a NATO compound and the US Embassy but no one was hurt, said police official Jan Agha.

The boom of the rockets was heard in the live broadcast of President Ashraf Ghani's speech. As he also heard the thud, Ghani interrupted his message to say: "If they are thinking the rocket attack will keep Afghans down, they are wrong."

The Kabul area where the rockets hit is one of the most secure in the Afghan capital, where embassies and government buildings are surrounded by high cement blast walls and coils of razor wire. Many streets near the U.S. Embassy are closed off, as well as those near sensitive government and military locations.

Kabul police spokesman Hashmat Stanekzia said Afghan police had noticed a suspicious vehicle earlier on Tuesday morning and followed it to a mud-brick house near the sprawling Eid Gah mosque where hundreds had gathered to offer their prayers for the Eid al-Adha holiday.

Once inside the house, the suspects are believed to have fired the rockets, Stanekzia told The Associated Press. A helicopter gunship was called in and bombed the location, destroying the house and the vehicle.

Eyewitnesses at the scene said that after the explosions, sporadic shooting could be heard from the area, though it wasn't clear who was firing. The witnesses spoke on condition of anonymity fearing for their safety.

Another police official, Mohammed Akram, said four attackers were apparently involved though it was unclear if any survived the helicopter assault on the house. Police were combing the area in the heart of Kabul, where crowded open-air markets intrude on old residential areas of mostly poor, mud-brick homes.

There was no immediate statement from the Taliban, or a claim of responsibility for the attack by any other militant group, but the assault on the major Muslim holiday sent a stark message. It was also another blow to Ghani's efforts to bring the insurgents to the negotiation table and hold peace talks to end the country's 17-year war.

On Sunday, Ghani had offered a conditional cease-fire to last during the holiday, saying it would only take effect if the Taliban reciprocated.

The Taliban have been at war with the U.S.-backed Afghan government for nearly 17 years, and have stepped up

attacks in recent months, seizing rural districts and carrying out major assaults against security forces and government compounds on an almost daily basis.

On Monday, Afghan forces rescued nearly 150 people, including women and children, just hours after the Taliban ambushed a convoy of buses and abducted them in northern Kunduz province. The quick response marked a rare if limited battlefield success for the troops after weeks of unrelenting insurgent attacks.

Earlier this month, the insurgents launched a coordinated assault on Ghazni, a strategic city only 120 kilometers (75 miles) from Kabul and the capital of a province with the same name. They seized several neighborhoods, and it took security forces, aided by U.S. airstrikes and advisers, more than five days to drive them out.

The battle for the city killed at least 100 security forces and 35 civilians, according to Afghan officials. The Defense Ministry said about 200 militants were killed. In neighboring Pakistan, the new prime minister, Imran Khan, condemned the "cowardly" attack in Kabul.

Ghani criticized Pakistan following the attack on Ghazni and both the United States and Afghanistan have accused Pakistan of harboring Taliban militants. Islamabad denies the accusations. The UN special representative to Afghanistan, Tadamichi Yamamoto, pleaded for peace on the Muslim holiday.

"To allow all Afghans to commemorate this auspicious celebration, I strongly urge the parties to the conflict to demonstrate good will, to respect this time of joy and tolerance and to refrain from resorting to violence," he said. Ahead of the Eid al-Adha holiday, Taliban leader Maulvi Haibatullah Akhunzadah released a message on Saturday, saying there would be no peace in Afghanistan as long as the "foreign occupation" continues and reiterated that the group will only negotiate directly with the U.S., which it blames for the 17-year war.

The US and NATO officially ended their combat mission at the end of 2014 but have repeatedly come to the aid of Afghan forces in recent years to prevent the Taliban from advancing into major cities. The Taliban have sent delegations to Uzbekistan and Indonesia in recent weeks, raising their diplomatic profile even while carrying out deadly attacks. The Taliban say they met with a U.S. diplomat in Qatar earlier this month for what the group described as "preliminary" talks, and said it expected further negotiations.

- AP