

Car bombing in Kabul kills US, Romanian soldier, 10 Afghan civilians

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A foreign soldier with NATO-led Resolute Support Mission inspects at the site of a suicide attack in Kabul, Afghanistan September 5, 2019. REUTERS/Omar Sobhani

Kabul: A Taliban suicide car bombing in Kabul on Thursday killed a US service member, a Romanian soldier and at least 10 Afghan civilians in a busy diplomatic area that includes the US Embassy – the second such attack this week underscoring Afghan government warnings that a preliminary US-Taliban deal on ending America’s longest war was moving dangerously quickly.

“Peace with a group that is still killing innocent people is meaningless,” Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said in a statement.

A NATO Resolute Support mission statement said the two service members were “killed in action,” without providing details or releasing their names pending notification of their families. The American soldier was the fourth U.S. service member killed in the past two weeks in Afghanistan.

Resolute Support (RS) forces guard at the site of a car bomb explosion in Kabul, Afghanistan.

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The Taliban said they targeted vehicles of “foreigners” as they tried to enter the heavily guarded Shashdarak area in Kabul where Afghan national security authorities have offices. The NATO Resolute Support mission is nearby, and British soldiers were at the scene, retrieving what appeared to be the remains of a NATO vehicle.

Footage widely shared on social media showed the suicide bomber’s vehicle turning into the checkpoint and exploding – and a passer-by trying to sprint away just seconds before. “We all saw on security camera who were targeted!” presidential spokesman Sediq Seddiqi tweeted.

Once again, stunned civilians made up most of the victims.

“I don’t know who brought us to the hospital and how,” said one of the wounded, Nezamuddin Khan, who was knocked unconscious and woke up in a local hospital.

Damaged cars are seen at the site following a suicide attack in Kabul, Afghanistan, September 5, 2019 in this still image taken from a social media video. (Photo: Reuters)

The explosion at the checkpoint, which has been targeted in the past, follows a Taliban attack against a foreign compound late Monday that killed at least 16 people and wounded more than 100, almost all of them local civilians. An Associated Press reporter on the phone with the U.S. Embassy when Thursday's blast occurred heard sirens begin blaring there.

Hours later, the Taliban claimed responsibility for a car bombing outside an Afghan military base in the Logar provincial capital, Puli Alam, which houses members of the Afghan special forces. Provincial council chief Haseebullah Stanekzai said a small number of international forces also had been in the area. Governor Anwar Khan Es-Haqzai said four civilians were killed and four others wounded.

US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad has been in Kabul this week briefing Ghani and other Afghan leaders on the U.S.-Taliban deal to end nearly 18 years of fighting that he says only needs President Donald Trump's approval to become a reality. Khalilzad has not commented publicly on this week's attacks.

The Afghan government has raised serious concerns about the deal, including in new comments on Thursday as the latest attack occurred. The agreement was moving with "excessive speed," presidential adviser Waheed Omer told reporters, warning of difficult days ahead.

"Afghans have been bitten by this snake before," Omer said, recalling past agreements from which, like now, the Afghan government has been sidelined. "Where there is no feeling of ownership there is no safety," he said.

The Taliban, at their strongest since their 2001 defeat by a U.S.-led invasion, have refused to negotiate with the government, calling it a U.S. puppet.

The Afghan government on Wednesday said it shares the concerns raised by several former U.S. ambassadors to Afghanistan, who warned that a full U.S. troop withdrawal that moves too quickly and without requiring the Taliban to meet certain conditions, such as reducing violence, could lead to "total civil war" such as the one that engulfed the country in the 1990s, before the Taliban swept into power.

Khalilzad has said 5,000 U.S. troops would withdraw from five bases in Afghanistan within 135 days of a final deal. Between 14,000 and 13,000 troops are currently in the country.

However, the Taliban want all of the approximately 20,000 U.S. and NATO troops out of Afghanistan immediately, while the U.S. seeks a withdrawal in phases that would depend on the Taliban meeting certain conditions, such as a reduction in violence.

The U.S. also seeks Taliban guarantees that they will not allow Afghanistan to become a haven from which extremist groups such as al-Qaida and the local affiliate of the Islamic State group can launch global attacks.

The deal is meant to be followed quickly by intra-Afghan talks that the U.S. would like to see begin ahead of Afghanistan's presidential election on Sept. 28.

The Afghan president, who has been shown the U.S.-Taliban deal but not allowed to keep a copy, has insisted that the election must not be delayed. He seeks a second term and what he calls a strong mandate to negotiate with the militant group on the country's political future. He has rejected talk of an interim government, an idea that has gained such traction in Kabul that many other presidential candidates have barely campaigned.

Ghani's adviser, Omer, acknowledged on Thursday the risks of holding another chaotic election after the

presidential one in 2014 and last year's parliamentary vote. He said the election must happen on time but said a vote that is not transparent will "cause challenges."

- AP