

AfPak: Mutiny on the Bounty

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The Taliban began their spring campaign as a British lord put a price on Bush's scalp

Kabul was cast into chaos Sunday as the Taliban began their spring offensive with attacks on US, British, German and Russian embassies, NATO headquarters, Camp Eggers, a hotel, President Karzai's palace compound and parliament. "These are coordinated attacks that went just as we planned," Taliban spokesman Qari Talha told The Daily Beast. "This is only the start of what's in store this year and next for the Americans and Karzai."

Targets across the country included Vice-President Mohammad Karim Khalili, airfields and police stations in three eastern provinces. About 20 insurgents were killed in the attacks, which injured at least 15 police officers and nine civilians.

US ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker dismissed the Taliban's claim of responsibility: "Frankly, I don't think the Taliban is good enough," leaving unsaid who is. Crocker commended the NATO-trained Afghan forces, whose capability was "proven today by their professional and highly effective response in restoring order".

A warning came from New Delhi's Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies Director Dipankar Banerjee: "We're only going to see an increase in these attacks. It helps [the militants] ensure political dominance in the new order as they slowly take over." Talha said that Sunday's strikes were just a preview of the fighting season to come. "We want to engage smaller numbers of well-trained fighters to make attacks on significant government, American and NATO targets." He said the mastermind of the operation was Hajji Lala, the insurgency's shadow governor of Kabul and its eastern-front military chief.

One big difference, according to Talha and other Taliban sources, was that this time the Haqqani network did not play a significant role in the operation. Rivalry has developed between the Taliban and its eastern partner in insurgency, although Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin have in the past declared their loyalty to Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar. Talha says he's hopeful that the Taliban and the Haqqanis will work together in the future. "With this coordination we can double of number and size of attacks across Afghanistan."

Sunday's attacks confirmed the ease with which the Taliban are able to infiltrate fighters, suicide bombers, explosives, rocket-propelled grenades and automatic weapons into the capital and the main towns of the three surrounding provinces. The Kabul government's 300,000-strong security forces actually make this easier, Talha explained. "The bigger the Afghan police, army, and intelligence services grow, the less effective they become. Kabul's intelligence and police are weaker than ever, allowing us to carry out these stunning

episodes.”

A senior Kabul-government official in eastern Paktia province confirms this: “I fear our intelligence and security forces are becoming less coordinated while the Taliban’s coordination is getting better.” The problem is that the intelligence service, the police, and the army, controlled by Tajiks, are riven by ethnic rivalries and mistrust between them, Pashtuns and Uzbeks. “They do not coordinate with each other. This provides a golden opportunity for the Taliban to infiltrate and penetrate wherever and when they wish.”

American, Afghan and NATO officials undoubtedly will call the Taliban assault a failed offensive. But that is small comfort to most Afghans.

British parliamentarian Lord Nazir Ahmed added a note of whimsy to AfPak’s ongoing tragedy, when he announced a reward for the capture of US President Barack Obama and his predecessor George W Bush at a reception in Lord Nazir’s honour held by the business community of Haripur, Pakistan on Friday. Nazir said that placing a bounty on Lashkar-e-Taiba Chief Hafiz Saeed was an insult to all Muslims, and by doing so President Obama has challenged the dignity of the Muslim Ummah. Lashkar-e-Taiba is held responsible for the 2008 Mumbai bombings and is on the US terrorist list.

“If the US can announce a reward of \$10 million for the captor of Hafiz Saeed, I can announce a bounty of 10 million pounds on President Obama and his predecessor George Bush,” Lord Nazir said. A terrorist tit-for-tat.

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