

Afghan patriot guns down 9 Americans at Kabul Airport

by Molly Hennessy-Fiske via stan - Los Angeles Times *Wednesday, Apr 27 2011, 11:23am*
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Eight U.S. troops and an American contractor were killed early Wednesday when a veteran Afghan military pilot opened fire on trainers during a meeting in a military compound near Kabul International Airport.

The Taliban quickly claimed responsibility in what it said was the latest attack by an insurgent infiltrator.

The pilot began shooting during a meeting in the operations room of the Afghan National Army Air Corps building about 10 a.m. after having an argument with a foreign colleague, targeting foreign instructors and advisors, according to statements released by NATO and Afghan officials.

Afghan security forces heard the shots and surrounded the building, storming inside even as other officers leapt from the building's second floor, according to Col. Bahader, the Afghan army's spokesman at the airport, who goes by one name. None of the Afghan personnel died in the attack, he said.

Inside the building, NATO forces returned fire, killing the attacker, Afghan officials said. A NATO soldier and five Afghan Air Force troops were wounded in the gunfight, officials said. A NATO quick-reaction force responded to the scene, and alliance and Afghan officials were still investigating late Wednesday.

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Robbins, a Pentagon spokesperson, confirmed that all those killed were Americans.

The pilot, Ahmad Gul Sahebi, 48, was from the Tarakhail district of Kabul province and had served in the Afghan army for decades, according to a man who claimed to be his brother.

Dr. Hassan Sahebi, a Kabul neurologist, described his brother as a dedicated soldier who was not affiliated with the Taliban or other insurgents. He said in a telephone interview that his brother had been wounded four or five times in the line of duty and was once so severely injured when his plane crashed that he had to be operated on 22 times.

"My brother was a little depressed recently, but he had served with Afghanistan's national army for 20 years," Sahebi said. Earlier, in a television interview, Sahebi said the pilot had recently been forced to sell his home. "He loved his country and his people. ... He was a good man."

A Taliban spokesman offered a different account of the attack.

He claimed the shooter he called Azizullah was an insurgent from Kabul's conservative Arzan Qimat neighborhood on the city's outskirts who succeeded in posing as a pilot with help from Afghan security forces and died when he ran out of bullets.

"The Afghan Air Force Corps officers fully helped the suicide attacker to get in and start shooting at [Afghan] and foreign soldiers," Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said.

He said Azizullah contacted Taliban officials two years ago, and had been feeding them information. He planned his attack for five months, but it was only approved the day before because he was a valuable source.

"This attack indicates that we can access any security forces facilities of the enemy we want," Mujahid said. "We have our infiltrators in all sections."

The Afghan air force, formerly the Afghan National Army Air Corps, has benefited from years of training and upgrades by U.S. forces. But it has also seen rapid recruitment as Afghan security forces ramp up to at least 305,000, raising fears of Taliban sleeper agents among new recruits.

The air force has grown to include about 5,000 troops, Bahader said, more than doubling in size since 2008, when it inaugurated its new headquarters at the airport. The force is equipped with 26 new or refurbished aircraft, including transport helicopters and Ukrainian military planes bought with U.S. funding.

U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. David Simons, a spokesman for the alliance training mission, said the NATO Air Training Command based at the airport "has gone through numerous upgrades to secure the facilities, both on the Afghan side and the U.S. side."

He said 95% of the Afghan air force personnel had been vetted with biometric screening, but declined to comment about whether the shooter had been screened.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai ordered the Defense Ministry to investigate the shooting and other recent incidents that involved insurgents posing as or infiltrating the ranks of the security forces.

Such attacks are part of a Taliban strategy to undermine the Afghan population's faith in NATO troops and their own security forces as the U.S. prepares to begin drawing down its forces this summer, said Martine van Bijlert, co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network, a Kabul-based think tank.

"The image they're portraying is, 'we're everywhere,' she said of the Taliban. " 'We're the one who are staying and we can go wherever we want."

(Special correspondents Aimal Yaqubi and Hashmat Baktash contributed to this report.)

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