

Rockets Fired at Kabul Airport Amid US Withdrawal Hit Homes

Rocket fire apparently targeting Kabul's international airport struck a nearby neighborhood on Monday, the eve of the deadline for American troops to withdraw from the country's longest war after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. It wasn't immediately clear if anyone was hurt.

The rockets did not halt the steady stream of U.S. military C-17 cargo jets taking off and landing at Hamid Karzai International Airport in the Afghan capital. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. Last week, the Islamic State group launched a devastating suicide bombing at one of the airport gates that killed at least 169 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members.

The airport has been a scene of chaos in the two weeks since the Taliban blitz across Afghanistan took control of the country, nearly 20 years after the initial U.S. invasion that followed the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. But since the suicide bombing, the Taliban have tightened their security cordon around the airfield, with their fighters seen just up to the last fencing separating them from the runway.

In the capital's Chahr-e-Shaheed neighborhood, a crowd quickly gathered around the remains of a four-door sedan used by the attackers. The car had what appeared to be six homemade rocket tubes mounted in place of backseats. The Islamic State group and other militants routinely mount such tubes into vehicles and quietly transport them undetected close to a target.

"I was inside the house with my children and other family members, suddenly there were some blasts," said Jaiuddin Khan, who lives nearby. "We jumped into the house compound and lay

on the ground.”

Some of the rockets landed across town in Kabul’s Salim Karwan neighborhood, striking residential apartment blocks, witnesses said. That neighborhood is some 3 kilometers (miles) from the airport. There were no immediate reports of injuries.

Five rockets targeted the airport, said U.S. Navy Capt. Bill Urban, a spokesman for the American military’s Central Command. A defensive weapon known by the acronym C-RAM – a Counter- Rocket, Artillery and Mortar System – targeted the rockets in a whirling hail of ammunition, Urban said. The system has a distinct, drill-like sound that echoed through the city at the time of the attack.

In Washington, the White House issued a statement saying officials briefed President Joe Biden on “the rocket attack at Hamid Karzai International Airport” in Kabul, apparently referring to the vehicle-based rocket launch that morning.

“The president was informed that operations continue uninterrupted at HKIA, and has reconfirmed his order that commanders redouble their efforts to prioritize doing whatever is necessary to protect our forces on the ground,” the statement said, using an acronym for Kabul’s airport.

After the rocket fire, planes continued to land and taxi across to the northern military side of the airport. Planes took off roughly every 20 minutes at one point Monday morning. One C-17 landing Monday afternoon shot off flares as it approached the airport—a defensive maneuver to protect against heat-seeking missiles and a sign that the U.S. military remains concerned about surface-to-air missiles loose in the country.

Smoke from several fires along the airport’s perimeter could be seen throughout Monday. It wasn’t clear what was ablaze, though U.S. forces typically destroy material and equipment they won’t take with them during the evacuation.

The airport had been one of the few ways out for foreigners and Afghans fleeing the Taliban takeover. However, coalition nations have halted their evacuations in recent days, leaving the U.S. military largely alone at the base with some remaining allied Afghan forces providing security.

The White House said Monday that over the last 24 hours, the American military carried out some 1,200 evacuees on 26 C-17 flights, while two coalition flights flew out 50 others. Since the end of July, U.S. forces have evacuated some 122,300 people, the White House said.

Ross Wilson, the chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul now working out of the airport, insisted those evacuations remained ongoing in a message on Twitter.

"This is a high-risk operation," Wilson wrote. "Claims that American citizens have been turned away or denied access to HKIA by Embassy staff or U.S. Forces are false." He did not elaborate.

The U.S. State Department released a statement Sunday signed by around 100 countries, as well as NATO and the European Union, saying they had received "assurances" from the Taliban that people with travel documents would still be able to leave the country.

The Taliban have said they will allow normal travel after the U.S. withdrawal is completed on Tuesday and they assume control of the airport. However, it remains unclear how the militants will run the airport and which commercial carriers will begin flying in, given the ongoing security concerns there.

While the Taliban have honored a pledge not to attack Western forces so long as they evacuate by Tuesday, the threat from the Islamic State's local affiliate remains a danger. The group, known as the Khorasan Province after a historic name for the region, saw some of its members freed as the Taliban

released prisoners across the country during their takeover.

On Sunday, a U.S. drone strike blew up a vehicle carrying IS suicide bombers before they could

attack the ongoing military evacuation at Kabul's airport, American officials said. However, the Taliban said the strike killed at least 10 people—including civilians and three children, sparking anger over the civilian casualties.

Urban acknowledged the reports of civilian casualties.

"We would be deeply saddened by any potential loss of innocent life," he said in a statement.

The U.S. carried out another drone strike elsewhere in the country on Saturday; it said two IS members were killed.

On Tuesday, the U.S. is set to conclude a massive two-week-long airlift of more than 114,000 Afghans and foreigners and withdraw the last of its troops, ending America's longest war with the Taliban back in power.

However, Afghans remain fearful of the Taliban returning to the oppressive rule for which it was once known. There have been sporadic reports of killings and other abuses in the sweep across the country.

Meanwhile, a cross-border shooting across the frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan killed two Pakistani soldiers, the military said. Pakistani troops "responded in a befitting manner" after the attack in the district of Bajur of the country's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, the military said.

Associated Press writers Jon Gambrell in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Rahim Faiez in Istanbul, Munir Ahmed in Islamabad and Robert Burns and Lou Kesten in Washington contributed to this report.

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