

Taliban Insurgents Murder 4 Humanitarian Aid Workers

Three armed Taliban insurgents swept into a Kabul guesthouse on Nov. 29, murdering three South Africans and two Afghans in the compound of an international aid agency in the Afghan capital.

Werner Groenewald and his two teenage children were murdered in the guesthouse, where they lived in Kabul's western Karte Seh district, along with an Afghan employee of their small aid organization, Partnership in Academics and Development (PAD). Another Afghan man visiting the compound at the time was also shot dead.

Dr. Hannelie Groenewald, the wife and mother of the South African victims, returned home late that Saturday afternoon from her work at a medical clinic to find her family's bullet-ridden bodies being loaded onto ambulances. They included her son Jean-Pierre, age 17, and daughter, Rode, 15.

The attackers had set the house ablaze, leaving her with only the clothes she was wearing and destroying all the family's documents and other possessions.

At least seven Afghans present in the compound were held hostage during the four-hour battle between the attackers and Afghan security forces. Another two persons were injured by random gun shots in the basement area. The murdered Afghan staff member of PAD, who is not named for security reasons, was married with two small children.

One surviving Afghan who reportedly managed to hide himself behind steel cabinets in the compound, which served as both home and offices for PAD staff, said the attackers shot Groenewald in the leg when they entered the building.

The insurgents had thrown a grenade at the gate into the compound to force their way into the two-story guesthouse. They were armed and wearing police uniforms, with one militant strapped into a suicide vest.

According to what Hannelie Groenewald later told her sister Riana du Pleiss, in Pretoria, "They took people hostage, and then they went upstairs after Werner again. They shot Werner again and the children. That's where they died."

When the militants were finally cornered by Afghan forces, one attacker detonated his suicide vest, and the other two were shot and killed.

The day after the PAD attack, Kabul chief of police Gen. Zahir Zahir submitted to the Afghan Interior Minister his resignation, which local press reported had been accepted. But on Dec. 1, the capital's police spokesman told both Agence France-Presse and Afghanistan's Channel 1 TV that security officials had refused to accept the general's resignation and reinstated him. Gen. Zahir himself had been targeted earlier in November by a suicide bomber, who managed to enter his offices when he was not present and killed his deputy.

Kabul has been rocked by nine deadly suicide attacks since mid-November, targeting foreign guesthouses, embassy vehicles, U.S. troops and an Afghan woman member of parliament. The renewed Taliban attacks have come just weeks before the withdrawal of foreign combat troops from Afghanistan by Dec. 31.

In a Twitter message sent out by Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid, the strictly Islamist insurgents fighting for political control of Afghanistan claimed that the PAD compound housed "a secret Christian missionary group."

But Du Plessis refuted the allegation, as quoted by several international media sources: "They thought Werner was a missionary trying to convert Muslims to Christians, but Werner

was not. He was an aid worker there to uplift Afghanistan. He did great work."

In a posting on his LinkedIn profile, Groenewald had written, "I am a change agent. Wherever I can, I try to influence positive change. I find great peace in the knowledge that I have contributed to someone else's advancement in life."

A statement published Nov. 30 on the PAD website released out of Redlands, California, confirmed the group's ongoing commitment to continue its humanitarian work, despite the "selfless sacrifice" of their staff's lives: "We honor their commitment to the people of Afghanistan. ... In the midst of this unprovoked attack, Partnership in Academics and Development remains committed to providing educational resources for Afghan citizens as they become part of the international community."

Speaking from Pretoria, Du Plessis told World Watch Monitor that she and her family were "praying earnestly" for her sister Hannelie as she made all the complicated arrangements necessary with the local authorities in Kabul, "in order to be repatriated back to South Africa with the bodies just as soon as possible."

"We ask people everywhere to pray for the safety of everyone else who is working in Afghanistan in similar situations, that there will not be more 'copycat' attacks mounted against those doing humanitarian work there," Du Plessis said.

Groenewald was the local director of PAD's educational projects in Afghanistan. A former pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church, he and his family had lived in Afghanistan since August 2003. Like other longer-term NGO staff families well versed in the local language and culture, the Groenewelds had stayed together, homeschooling their children as they grew up in Kabul.

Funeral services for the three South African Christians are

being planned at the family's home church, the Dutch Reformed Church in Moreleta Park.