

THE WORLD; 4 Captive Militants, 5 Guards Killed in Afghan Prison Siege

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Afghan officials said the incident began when inmates killed two armed guards and seized their weapons. The prisoners then killed three other guards. Two inmates died in the initial clash and two held out in the cellblock, taking shots at other inmates and security officers.

More than 200 Afghan soldiers secured the area and assisted in the raid. The government said officers from U.S.-led forces and the German contingent of the International Security Assistance Force, which patrols the capital, were brought in to advise the Afghans on ending the siege.

Armed with rocket launchers, machine guns and tanks, Afghan forces surrounded the facility. Shortly before police and troops stormed the prison, officials used loudspeakers to give the armed inmates a choice: "surrender or die."

FULL TEXT

Four members of Al Qaeda and five guards were killed at a prison here Friday during an 11-hour siege that ended when Afghan police and soldiers stormed the facility.

The last two armed inmates were killed as security forces swept into the Pul-i-Charki prison after sunset, authorities said.

"Three of the inmates killed today were Pakistani and one was an Iraqi," said Gen. Mohammed Zahir Azimi, a Defense Ministry spokesman. "All were Al Qaeda members in prison for involvement in terrorist activities in Afghanistan."

Afghan officials said the incident began when inmates killed two armed guards and seized their weapons. The prisoners then killed three other guards. Two inmates died in the initial clash and two held out in the cellblock, taking shots at other inmates and security officers.

Prison officials said they waited for hours to see whether the inmates would surrender but had to take action after gunfire was heard inside the prison in the late afternoon. Pul-i-Charki is believed to house about 1,400 inmates, including Taliban members, who were convicted of serious crimes.

"We began to hear random shots coming from inside the prison around 5 p.m., and shortly after rounds of fire could be heard," Warden Abdul Salaam Bakshi said. "We knew we had to do something quickly before the inmates went on a shooting spree inside the prison."

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were brought in to advise the Afghans on ending the siege.

Armed with rocket launchers, machine guns and tanks, Afghan forces surrounded the facility. Shortly before police and troops stormed the prison, officials used loudspeakers to give the armed inmates a choice: "surrender or die."

The Defense Ministry's Azimi said an inmate and five Afghan soldiers were injured and hospitalized.

The incident occurred in the prison's second cellblock, where three Americans are serving sentences of eight to 10 years for torturing Afghans on a freelance hunt for militants.

Jonathan K. Idema, Brent Bennett and Edward Caraballo have been at the prison for almost three months, since their conviction in an Afghan court for running a private prison in Kabul.

In the early hours of the standoff, prison officials said they believed that the inmates were after Idema.

"Killing Mr. Idema could have been a motive of the prisoners, but we also have reason to believe that they just wanted to escape," said an official at the Afghan Justice Department who requested anonymity. "We are still investigating."

Azimi would not comment on whether the three American inmates were moved to a different wing after the violence began.

Sources say the inmates involved in the clash were believed to have been low- or mid-level militants in the prison for about five months. It was not immediately clear why they hadn't been turned over to the U.S. military, which runs detention centers in Afghanistan for captured Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters.

Pul-i-Charki prison, on the outskirts of Kabul, is notorious for the mass executions that took place there in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Many security officials see the prison's decaying mud walls and sprawling structure as a safety liability.

Illustration

Caption: PHOTO: WAITING: An Afghan police officer moves into position at the Pul-i- Charki prison before security forces stormed the compound.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Ahmad Masood Reuters

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