

# SUICIDE BOMBER IN KHOST TARGETS BIOMETRIC SCREENING CHECKPOINT?



The HIIDE biometric data unit in use in Afghanistan. (ISAFMedia photo)

A suicide bombing in Khost, Afghanistan has caused multiple casualties today. Accounts of the bombing by Reuters and the New York Times have substantial differences in pertinent details, but the Reuters account stands out because it suggests that the attack was against NATO forces using biometric scanners to screen Afghan citizens at a checkpoint:

A suicide bomber struck a security checkpoint in Afghanistan's city of Khost on Wednesday, killing at least 16 people and wounding 30, police said, the latest attack to raise questions about stability in the volatile eastern region bordering Pakistan.

/snip/

A witness said that NATO and Afghan troops were using biometric data to screen residents of the provincial capital when the bomber struck.

The photo above is from ISAFMedia's Flickr feed and demonstrates the equipment used by NATO in

collecting biometric data. The caption provided by ISAFMedia reads:

A soldier from 2nd Platoon, A Company, 1-503rd Infantry Battalion, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team enters a member of a private Afghan security company into the Biometrics Automated Toolset (BAT) Handheld Interagency Identity Detection Equipment (HIIDE) System near the village of Heyderk Hel, Wardak Province, Afghanistan, Feb.18, 2010. The BAT HIIDE System assists soldiers in community mapping. U.S. Army photo by Sgt Russell Gilchrest.  
(Released)

The handset used for collection of the biometric data is quite powerful:

With a high-capacity storage of up to 22,000 full biometric portfolios (two iris templates, ten fingerprints, a facial image, and biographic data), L-1's HIIDE Series 4, or Handheld Interagency Identity Detection Equipment, is receiving praise for its functionality and appeal to Afghans wishing to have proper identification that would distinguish them from suspected terrorist in question.

The product description on L-1's Web site reads:

The HIIDE is the world's first hand-held tri-biometric system that allows users to enroll and match via any of the three primary biometrics: iris, finger and face. The intuitive user interface makes it easy to enter biographic data to create a comprehensive database on the enrolled subject.

The HIIDE provides complete functionality while connected to

a host PC or when operating in the field un-tethered.

The featured biometric technology is presently being used in a ring of security checkpoints around Kandahar City in Afghanistan, where Canadian operated bases are also being equipped with it. The enrollment procedure is voluntary and takes approximately six minutes to complete. All the biometric information is sent securely to the database of ISAF, NATO's International Security Assistance Force.

From the description by Reuters, it appears that the bomber attacked a screening point in Khost that was using the biometric scanner to screen civilians in the area. The biometric screening program is touted by NATO as a key tool in re-integration of former insurgents:

Demobilization involves the insurgents becoming lawful members of Afghan society that includes: a vetting process to ensure the applicant is a bona fide insurgent, personal registration that includes biometric data collection, registration of personal rifles and the turning over of heavy weapons and improvised explosive material.

Targeting of the screening of civilians with the biometric scanners would be an interesting new tactic by insurgents. However, the description of what appears to be the same bombing in the New York Times is very different from the account by Reuters and does not mention biometric screening.

More details from the Reuters story:

Sardar Mohammad Zazai, police chief of Khost province, said the bomber, riding a motorbike, detonated his explosives at the checkpoint manned by local and

foreign security forces.

The attack took place near a mosque in a crowded part of the city, which lies near the border with Pakistan. Women and children were among the wounded, local officials said.

The New York Times, however, places the bomber on foot and says that his target was a passing convoy of NATO vehicles, not a stationary checkpoint, even though the same local official was quoted:

The attack was carried out by a suicide bomber on foot near the Spin Jomat bazaar in the crowded downtown area of Khost, capital of the eastern province of the same name, said Sardar Mohammad Zazai, the Khost Province Police Chief. He said the bomber detonated an explosive vest as the convoy was passing through about noon.

However, the size of the blast and the number of casualties was unusually large for a lone bomber, and the authorities were still investigating the circumstances.

It is not immediately clear which of the two reports is later than the other, but somehow Zazai's account of the bomber changed between speaking to the two media outlets. If a biometric screening checkpoint was the target, this would be a very interesting strategy for the insurgents because it would be targeting civilians who presumably have already signed up for the program and been cleared as locals who pose no threat. Also, disrupting such a screening site temporarily might allow an insurgent known to be listed in the database to pass by a key checkpoint for carrying out a later mission.

Update: The Times has updated their story to match the account from Reuters:

At least 21 people, apparently including three American soldiers, were killed on Wednesday by a suicide bomber who attacked an American and Afghan military checkpoint in this provincial capital, Afghan officials said.

Most of the victims were Afghan civilians, including some children, who died when the attacker, believed to have been wearing a suicide vest, attacked a crowd at a checkpoint where American and Afghan soldiers were conducting biometric surveys of local residents.

Heh. And it looks like the editing is still a bit sloppy, as this paragraph has bits of the mutually exclusive versions of the story:

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