

Explosion, gunfire rock downtown Kabul

● No one claimed immediate responsibility for the assault

● Ministry of Information said three suicide bombers had attacked a post office building at the communications ministry

● The explosion comes a week after the Taliban announced their annual spring offensive

AFP | Kabul, Afghanistan

Suicide bombers and gunmen launched an attack near a government ministry in central Kabul on Saturday, officials said, in an ongoing assault that destroyed weeks of relative calm in the capital.

The attack near the communications ministry occurred one day after planned talks between the Taliban and Afghan representatives were cancelled.

No one claimed immediate responsibility for the assault, which left people stranded in the tall building. Six people were injured, according to a health ministry spokesman.

Initial reports were confused, with officials from different agencies saying three or four attackers were involved. It was not clear how many were suicide bombers and how many were



A general view of the Afghan communication ministry as an attack between Afghan forces and attackers is still going on in central Kabul



Please pray for us as the enemy has reached very close to us. Suicide attack on communication ministry

A MAN NAMED SYED JAILLANI JALLAN SAID ON FACEBOOK

gunmen involved in a follow-up assault.

Journalists heard one big blast at around 11:40 am (0710 GMT), followed by sporadic gunfire for

more than an hour afterward.

"The information that we have is four attackers have placed themselves near the communication ministry and are engaged

in gun battles with the Afghan security forces," Amanduddin Shariati, a security official in Kabul told AFP.

On Twitter, the Ministry of Information said three suicide bombers had attacked a post office building at the communications ministry.

General Sayed Mohammad Roshan Dil, the Kabul police chief, said four attackers had been wearing police uniforms and had targeted a shrine near the ministry. One of the attackers was killed, he told Tolo.

Local television footage

showed a small plume of smoke near the ministry, and people climbing out windows on a lower level.

On Facebook, a man named Syed Jaillani Jallan said he was trapped inside the ministry.

"Please pray for us as the enemy has reached very close to us. Suicide attack on communication ministry," he wrote. AFP could not immediately verify the comment.

Spring offensive

The communication ministry is located in downtown Ka-

bul, about two kilometres (1.25 miles) from the green zone, a heavily fortified foreign compound. It is the city's main commercial area and is home to a large hotel.

The ministry itself is an 18-storey building, thought to be the tallest in Kabul.

The explosion comes a week after the Taliban announced their annual spring offensive and amid ongoing fighting across Afghanistan.

The Afghan branch of the Islamic State group has also previously carried out multiple deadly attacks in Kabul.

Aside from a grenade attack on a military vehicle last week, the capital has in recent weeks enjoyed a period of relative calm, after a horrific year last year that saw a string of attacks including a massive bomb that was concealed in an ambulance and killed more than 100 people.

This week in the Qatari capital Doha, a summit planned between the Taliban and officials from across Afghanistan was scrapped at the last minute due to bickering over who should attend the conference.

The collapse comes at a critical time and amid continued bloodshed in Afghanistan, where the Taliban now control or influence about half of Afghanistan and 3,804 civilians were killed there last year, according to a UN tally.

Taliban officials are separately negotiating with the United States, which wants to forge a peace deal with the militants.

Thai Navy to remove bitcoin-rich couple's sea home



Chad Elwartowski and his Thai girlfriend Supranee Thepdet, known as "Bitcoin Girl Thailand"

● The US Embassy is "providing all appropriate assistance" to Elwartowski, who has engaged an attorney, an embassy official said

Bangkok, Thailand

The Thai Navy will begin removing a "seastead" home built by an American bitcoin investor and his partner off the coast of Thailand, an official said yesterday, as the couple remain in hiding from charges accusing them of violating the country's sovereignty.

Chad Elwartowski and his Thai girlfriend Supranee Thepdet, known as "Bitcoin Girl Thailand", are facing charges of threatening the kingdom's independence after authorities found their ocean-based home about 12 nautical miles from Phuket's shore.

But Elwartowski said the

home was 13 nautical miles out and therefore past Thailand's territorial waters.

The Thai Navy, which filed a complaint last week to Phuket's police, said the couple did not seek permission to construct their floating platform and a patrol ship was sent out on Saturday to dismantle it.

"We will do it today if we can," a senior Navy official said, adding that it might prove difficult given the depth of the waters where the home is located.

After the seastead is removed, it would be used as evidence against the couple, said a Royal Thai Navy statement, which denied sending "any forces to chase or threaten the couple".

The American's visa has been revoked and if charged and found guilty, the maximum punishment Elwartowski, a software engineer who worked for the US military, and Supranee could be sentenced to is the death penalty.

The bitcoin-rich couple --



A "seastead" home, about 12 nautical miles from Phuket's shore.

who are still in hiding -- are part of Ocean Builders, a community of entrepreneurs who aim to build permanent homes in waters outside of government territory.

Elwartowski blogged regularly on Ocean Builders about

erecting their ocean-dwelling home, a six-meter wide octagonal-shaped platform which included a kitchen, bathroom, eating area and bedroom.

The top of the platform served as a deck, which was covered with solar panels, and the whole

thing was mounted on a 2-metre-long floating steel "spar" which is anchored to the ocean's floor.

They had recently called for 20 interested investors for new seasteads -- costing about \$150,000 each -- to be built around their maiden platform, and the money would have initially been raised by bitcoin, Elwartowski said.

So far, five orders have been "lined up", he said.

They were an underwater restaurant, three "SeaBnBs" for vacationers, and a tuna-farming venture -- the latter which they had planned to get permission from the Thai government, he said.

Elwartowski has also said Ocean Builders was "apolitical in the goal" and the couple simply wanted to be free.

The seasteading community consists of "tens of thousands" of supporters worldwide, said Joe Quirk, president of the Seasteading Institute -- a think tank co-founded in 2008 by famed tech entrepreneur Peter Thiel advocating for the "Next New World".

The institute believes seasteading is a solution to modern governments that don't function efficiently under "obsolete political systems", and oceans could be "humanity's next frontier".

"Seasteaders and bitcoin enthusiasts have always been fans of each other, because both communities understand that these innovations will...solve some of the deepest problems humanity faces," Quirk said.

Venezuela's Guaido calls for 'biggest demo in history'

Caracas, Venezuela

Venezuela's opposition leader Juan Guaido called Friday for the "biggest demonstration in history" to put pressure on President Nicolas Maduro to step down.

The National Assembly head launched a challenge to Maduro's authority in January, declaring himself acting president.

Despite the support of more than 50 countries, including the United States, Guaido has been unable to dislodge Maduro, who retains the backing of the country's powerful military.

"We call on all the people of Venezuela to take part in the biggest demonstration in this country's history on May 1 to demand the usurpation ends definitively," said Guaido, addressing several hundred supporters at a rally in Caracas.

Guaido, 35, and the National Assembly have branded Maduro a "usurper" over his controversial re-election last year in polls widely viewed as rigged.

"Miraflores! Miraflores!" chanted supporters in reference to the presidential palace where Maduro lives.

The march will take place on Labor Day when the socialist government holds its own major street event.