

Rocket, bomb attacks boost US-Afghan tensions

Martin McLaughlin
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Seven rockets were fired at US and UN facilities in Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan, on Friday, injuring six people, doing minor damage to buildings and destroying several parked cars. The coordinated attack took place about 11:15 a.m. local time, with all the rockets fired during a two-minute period from three separate locations around the city, according to Pakistani police investigators.

The buildings targeted included the US Embassy, the American Center (formerly the US Information Service), a UN office and a Pakistan government building. A car belonging to the World Food Program was also hit. The attack was the first incident of violence in Islamabad since Pakistan's military commander, General Pervez Musharraf, seized power last month and removed the elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The rocket attack was almost certainly linked to the Sunday, November 14 deadline set by the United States and the United Nations Security Council for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to hand over Osama bin Laden. The Saudi construction magnate has been charged by US officials with responsibility for last year's bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, in which more than 200 people died.

Pakistan has been the closest ally of the Taliban, the Sunni Muslim group which came to power in most of Afghanistan last year after a bloody civil war, and imposed a particularly brutal form of Islamic fundamentalist rule. The United States does not recognize the Taliban government and there are no US facilities or personnel in Afghanistan—at least officially—making Islamabad the nearest American target.

Last August the Clinton administration launched a cruise missile attack on a camp in southern

Afghanistan, near the border with Pakistan, which it claimed was used as a training complex for Osama bin Laden and his supporters. The Taliban government in Kabul denounced the air attack for what it was—a flagrant act of aggression and violation of Afghan sovereignty—and denied any connection between their country and the embassy bombings in Africa.

In the last several months Washington has stepped up its pressure on Afghanistan to arrest bin Laden and hand him over to US authorities, obtaining support from Russia and China—engaged in their own conflicts with Islamic fundamentalist elements in central Asia—for a United Nations Security Council resolution demanding bin Laden's extradition. This resolution, passed October 15, gave the Taliban regime 30 days to comply or face sanctions including an end to landing rights for the Afghan national airline Ariana.

These demands have provoked genuine popular outrage in Afghanistan, where 50,000 people marched in Kandahar, the country's second largest city and Taliban's political center, and stoned a UN facility. The Taliban government has refused to turn over bin Laden to the United States, and Washington has refused a Taliban proposal that bin Laden leave Afghanistan and go to another country.

Taliban's principal leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, issued an appeal to the American people to end "hostility" to his movement. "If you do not take a step in this direction ... once again you will face earthquakes and storms from God's side, and then you will be surprised ... what is coming to you, and you will not be able to do anything about it," Omar said.

The US State Department called Omar's statement "provocative" and said it had a "threatening tone." It is likely that Omar's comments will be cited by the US as proof that the Taliban regime ordered the rocket attacks

in Islamabad. Given the past track record of the Clinton administration and the Pentagon, this means that American military action of some kind could be launched very soon against Afghanistan, together with a barrage of media propaganda about alleged ties to "terrorism."

Not counting the nearly continuous American bombing of targets in Iraq, it is five months since the end of the last major US military action overseas, the NATO air war against Yugoslavia. That is a comparatively long period for military inaction by the Clinton administration, which has carried out more overseas military actions than any American government since the Vietnam War.

The new military regime in Islamabad is moving quickly to align itself with the increasingly aggressive stance by Washington. Musharraf announced Friday that he would be willing to join the international campaign orchestrated by the United States by calling on Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden. Other Pakistani government officials, responsible for investigating the rocket attack in Islamabad, said that Taliban involvement could not be ruled out.

There are a number of pro-Taliban political and fundamentalist religious groups in Pakistan which would be likely targets in any crackdown ordered by Musharraf.

In Afghanistan Mullah Omar said he was convinced the Islamabad attack was carried out by forces seeking to undermine Taliban's relations with Pakistan and create conditions for further escalation of the conflict with the US and the United Nations. "We have shown readiness for negotiations," he said, "but the US government seems bent on force and looks down upon us."

Meanwhile a terrorist attack against a Taliban leader took place in the Afghan capital, on the same day as the Islamabad rockets. A car bomb exploded outside the main Wazir Akbar Khan mosque in Kabul, wounding the driver and damaging the car of Amir Khan Muttaqi, the information minister of the Taliban government.



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