Afghanistan: Attacks in Kabul expose US occupation's deepening crisis

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Coordinated attacks by Taliban guerrillas left at least 26 dead and 57 wounded in the heart of Kabul Wednesday, while paralyzing the Afghan capital for hours. The sophisticated operation, which targeted three government buildings, underscored the mounting crisis confronting the eight-year-old US occupation of Afghanistan and the American-backed puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai.

The attacks came just days before the scheduled visit to Kabul of President Barack Obama's special envoy, Richard Holbrooke, who is conducting what he has described as a "listening tour" that is a prelude to a major escalation of the US intervention throughout the region.

At least five guerrillas carrying Kalashnikov rifles and explosives stormed the Afghan Justice Ministry after killing two guards. They were able to take control of several floors of the government building, killing a number of officials and forcing the minister of justice and others to barricade themselves in their offices.

Meanwhile two others struck at the directorate of prisons in a Kabul suburb and an eighth attacker was killed outside the Education Ministry.

A spokesman for the Taliban, the Islamist movement that constituted the Afghan government before the US invaded the country in October 2001, said that it was responsible for the attacks. The spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahed, explained, "We have warned the Afghan government to stop torturing our prisoners. Today we attacked the Justice Ministry compounds."

The Taliban and other opposition groups have charged that political prisoners are routinely subjected to torture in Afghanistan's prisons. Last December, scores of these prisoners went on hunger strike, sewing their mouths shut, to protest this abuse.

It took Afghan commandos, apparently led by US Special Forces troops dressed in plainclothes, at least four hours to retake the Justice Ministry. In the meantime, much of the city of 4 million was paralyzed, with streets blockaded by the military and police, businesses and shops closed and people staying inside their homes.

The *New York Times* correspondent in Kabul described a "growing sense of siege in the capital."

Afghanistan's interior minister, Hanif Atmar, stated the obvious: "The enemy still has the capability to bring this amount of weapons and explosives inside the city of Kabul and find their way to government institutions."

According to the *Times*, Atmar vowed to introduce new and more draconian security measures, warning that they would prove "uncomfortable" for Kabul's residents. The city is already ringed by roadblocks, with areas cordoned off for security, buildings protected by blast walls and cars subjected to random searches.

The attacks exposed the reality that the neither the Karzai government nor the 70,000 US and NATO troops that keep it in power are capable of maintaining security in virtually any part of the country, including the capital itself.

As the International Council on Security and Development, the London-based think tank which closely follows developments in Afghanistan, recently reported: "The Taliban now holds a permanent presence in 72 percent of Afghanistan, up from 54 percent a year ago. Taliban forces have advanced from their southern heartlands, where they are now the de facto governing power in a number of towns and villages, to Afghanistan's western and north-western provinces, as well as provinces north of Kabul... Three out of the four main highways into Kabul are now compromised by Taliban activity. The capital city has plummeted to minimum levels of control, with the Taliban and other criminal elements infiltrating the city at will."

Wednesday's assault on Kabul's ministries follows a series of similar spectacular attacks over the past year. Last July, a suicide bomb attack shattered the Indian embassy, killing more than 50 people. In April, gunmen attacked a military parade in the capital, forcing President Karzai and other leading officials to run for their lives. And in January of 2008, guerrillas struck at the Serena Hotel, Kabul's only luxury hotel.

A poll released Monday by three Western news agencies

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showed support plummeting for both the US-led occupation and the Karzai government. The percentage of those saying they viewed US forces favorably had plunged to 47 percent, down from 83 percent in a similar poll conducted in 2005. The greatest concern was expressed over US air strikes, which have claimed an increasing toll of civilian casualties over the past year.

The mounting hatred of the government and the occupation and popular dissatisfaction with chronic poverty and unemployment, under conditions in which corrupt government officials and their cronies have shamelessly enriched themselves, have all served to strengthen the hand of the Taliban and other forces fighting against the foreign troops and the Karzai government.

The number of dead and wounded is sure to rise as the Obama administration prepares its own "surge" of occupation forces into Afghanistan. The recently elected president met Wednesday with Defense Secretary Robert Gates—a holdover from the Bush administration—to discuss military options in the country, and a formal announcement of plans to nearly double US troop levels is anticipated by the end of the week. Under the plan, some 30,000 more US soldiers and Marines would be sent to Afghanistan over the next several months.

Washington's efforts to pressure its NATO allies to conduct a similar escalation have thus far produced little results. While Vice President Joseph Biden made a pitch for greater involvement by the European powers during last weekend's Munich Security Conference, he came back with no pledges of support. General David Petraeus left Paris similarly empty-handed on Monday after meeting with French officials. French Defense Minister Hervé Morin indicated before the arrival of the US commander that Paris believed greater emphasis is needed on a political solution.

Underlying this reluctance, to be drawn deeper into the Afghan quagmire, is Europe's recognition that Washington, under Obama—just as under Bush—is pursuing its own strategic aims in the region. These are driven not by a desire to defeat "terrorism," but rather the determination to establish US hegemony in a Central Asian region that contains some of the world's richest oil and natural gas reserves.

Meanwhile, Holbrooke, who is set to arrive in Kabul on Friday, held talks in Islamabad with President Asif Ali Zardari, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Army Chief Gen. Ashfaq Kayani and other officials.

The Pakistani daily *Dawn* described the talks as "frank, candid and straightforward" and reported that Holbrooke insisted that "the US wanted to see the tribal areas cleared of safe havens of Al Qaeda and the Taliban" and was prepared to "meet the military hardware needs of the country for counterinsurgency operations."

Fierce fighting is already going on between the Pakistani Army and Islamist militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and nearby Swat Valley along the Afghan border in northwest Pakistan. The United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) warned Tuesday that the conflict could turn as many as 600,000 people in the impoverished region into displaced persons over the coming weeks.

Holbrooke is clearly demanding that the Pakistani government conduct an even greater slaughter, with the implicit threat that Washington is prepared to continue and intensify its own military operations in the area.

According to *Dawn*, the Pakistani officials stated their objection to the missile attacks that the US has conducted against Pakistan, which have continued since Obama's inauguration. At least 35 such attacks, carried out by pilotless drones, have been reported since August, with the number of civilians killed conservatively estimated at over 130. While according to some reports, Islamabad has signaled its tacit approval of the strikes, officially the Pakistani government has condemned them, insisting that they only fuel support for anti-government forces.

"Pakistan's concerns regarding the planned US military surge in Afghanistan were also communicated to the ambassador," *Dawn* reported. "'The military surge might have implications for Pakistan,' Mr. Qureshi said."

Indeed, implicit in the arrival of Holbrooke, who oversaw some of the worst US-backed crimes during the wars in the Balkans under the Clinton administration, is the threat that the escalation being prepared by the Obama administration in Afghanistan, will be aimed at initiating a wider war inside Pakistan as well.

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