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Reuters

Gunmen attack embassies, parliament in Afghan capital

By Amie Ferris-Rotman and Rob Taylor

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Gunmen launched multiple attacks in the Afghan capital Kabul on Sunday, assaulting Western embassies in the heavily guarded, central diplomatic area and at the parliament in the west, witnesses and officials said.

Taliban insurgents claimed responsibility for the assault, one of the boldest on the capital since U.S.-backed Afghan forces removed the group from power in 2001.

The Taliban said their main targets were the German and British embassies and the headquarters of Afghanistan's NATO-led force. Taliban fighters had also launched assaults in two provinces, a spokesman for the insurgents said.

"We claim responsibility for these attacks," said Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid.

The coordinated attack is bound to intensify worry in the run-up to the planned withdrawal of foreign combat troops by the end of 2014.

Afghan security forces, who are responsible for the safety of the capital, were scrambling to reinforce areas around the so-called green diplomatic section of the city centre.

Attackers fired a rocket-propelled grenade that landed just outside the front gate of a house used by British diplomats in the city centre and smoke billowed from the area after the blast, a Reuters witness said.

British embassy sources said staff were in a lockdown.

Two rockets hit a British Embassy guard tower near the Reuters office in the city.

A spokesman for NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said via Twitter that there were no reports of casualties on possibly seven locations in Kabul.

"ANSF and ISAF responding as needed," the spokesman said, referring to Afghan security forces and their NATO partners.

However, fighting was going on near the U.S., Russian and German embassies, and at some ISAF facilities, the Twitter report said.

Three other rockets hit a supermarket near the German Embassy popular with foreigners, Reuters witnesses said. Women scurried for cover as crackling gunfire was heard above.

As the gunfire continued, U.S. army convoys could be seen coming to the area accompanied by Afghan police in flak jackets.

Shooting came from various directions in an area close to both the U.S. and British embassies, while smoke billowed from the nearby German embassy, the Reuters witnesses said.

Embassy alarms were sounding. Staff at the embassies were not available for comment.

Attackers also fired rockets at the parliament building in the west of the city, and at the Russian embassy, a spokesman for the parliament said.

Most MPs had left the building before it came under attack, said a lawmaker.

Afghan media said insurgents had stormed the Star Hotel complex near the presidential palace and the Iranian embassy and black smoke was pouring from the building.

In the eastern province of Paktia, insurgents occupied a four-storey building near the compound of the chief of police, a witness said.

A helicopter gunship from Afghanistan's NATO-led force was firing at the building in the province on the Pakistani border, which has been plagued by violence for years.