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## Teenage suicide bomber kills 6 in Afghan capital

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A teenage suicide bomber blew himself up outside NATO headquarters in the Afghan capital on Saturday, killing at least six civilians in a strike that targeted the heart of the U.S.-led military operation in the country, officials said.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the blast, which was the latest in a series of insurgent attacks in the heavily-fortified Afghan capital aimed at undercutting a months-long campaign by the U.S.-led coalition to shore up security in Kabul before a significant withdrawal of combat troops limits American options.

While bombings and shootings elsewhere in Afghanistan often receive relatively little attention, attacks in the capital score propaganda points for the insurgents by throwing doubt on the government's ability to provide security even the seat of its power. The attacks also aim to undermine coalition claims of improving security ahead of the planned withdrawal of foreign troops by the end of 2014.

The bomber struck just before noon Saturday outside the headquarters of the U.S.-led NATO coalition, on a street that connects the alliance headquarters to the nearby U.S. and Italian embassies, a large U.S. military base and the Afghan Defense Ministry.

The alliance and police said all of the dead were Afghans, and the Ministry of Interior said some were street children. Kabul police said in a statement that the bomber was 14 years old.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, saying the target was a U.S. intelligence facility nearby.

German Brig. Gen. Gunter Katz, the spokesman for the U.S.-led international military alliance, said there were no coalition casualties.

Interior Ministry spokesman Sediq Sediqi blamed the attack on the Haqqani network, one of the most dangerous militant groups fighting U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan. He did not say what he was basing that conclusion on, but the Haqqani group, which is linked to both the Taliban and al-Qaida, has been responsible for several high-profile attacks in the Afghan capital in the past.

On Friday, the U.S. designated the Pakistan-based Haqqani network a terrorist organization, a move that bans Americans from doing business with members of the group and blocks any assets it holds in the United States.

The Obama administration went forward with the decision despite misgivings about how the largely symbolic act could further stall planned Afghan peace talks or put yet another chill on the United States' already fragile counterterrorism alliance with Pakistan.

Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mijahid said the decision will have no impact on the war against the Afghan government and U.S.-led forces, and added that the Haqqanis were part of the Taliban and not a separate group. He said its founder, Jalaluddin Haqqani, was a loyal member of the Taliban leadership council and a "person of trust" to the movement's leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar.

"It will not have a negative effect on our struggle and we are rejecting this announcement," Mujahid said in an email.

The Haqqani network has been blamed for a series of high profile attacks against foreign targets in Kabul, including coordinated attacks last April against NATO and government facilities that lasted more than a day before the insurgents were killed. A year ago, they were blamed for a rocket-propelled grenade assault on the U.S. Embassy and NATO headquarters. In June, gunmen stormed a lakeside hotel near Kabul and 18 people in a 12-hour rampage.

American officials estimate the Haqqani forces at 2,000 to 4,000 fighters and say the group maintains close ties with al-Qaida.

Earlier Saturday, hundreds of Afghans and officials had gathered just a few hundred meters (yards) from the site of the attack to lay wreaths at a statue to commemorate the 11th anniversary of the death of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the charismatic Northern Alliance commander who was killed in an al-Qaida suicide bombing two days before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The alliance joined with the United States to help rout the Taliban after America invaded Afghanistan a month later in the wake of the attacks.