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AFP

India 'blames Pakistan militants' for Kabul attack

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India blames Pakistan-based militants for an attack on its citizens in Kabul in February, a government source said Thursday, heightening concern about a South Asian "proxy war" in Afghanistan.

The well-placed source, who asked not to be named, said the Pakistan-based group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) was responsible for the attack that killed seven Indians in a gun and bomb assault in Kabul on February 26.

Analysts say India and Pakistan are locked in a struggle for influence in Afghanistan, which could bring new instability to the war-wracked country as US-led international troops eye their exit after mid-2011.

"The LeT is responsible. We have no doubt about that," the Indian government source told reporters, referring to a group that New Delhi believes to be funded and supported by the Pakistani army and intelligence services.

India also blames the LeT for the Mumbai attacks in November 2008 that left 166 people dead and badly strained already acrimonious ties with Pakistan. The LeT and the Pakistani government deny involvement.

Indian interests in Afghanistan have been repeatedly targeted. Its embassy was bombed in October last year and on July 7, 2008, which some analysts say is a deliberate campaign to encourage New Delhi to pull out.

Indian officials in Kabul also believe a December 15 suicide car bombing that killed eight people also targeted Indians, although former Afghan first vice president Ahmad Zia Massoud had a home in the same street.

New Delhi has poured money into Afghanistan and has become an influential partner of the government in Kabul -- to the growing concern of Islamabad, which sees Afghanistan as its backyard and a strategic partner.

In a call to AFP last month, a LeT spokesman denied carrying out the February Kabul attacks and said that the group had no network in Afghanistan.

The Indian government source alleged on Thursday that the LeT was operating out of Kunar province, northeast of Kabul.

Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan have fought three wars since partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and remain at loggerheads over the disputed region of Kashmir, which they administer jointly but claim in full.

Despite the repeated attacks on Indians in Afghanistan, New Delhi remains "engaged and committed in Afghanistan," the source, who was authorised to brief reporters on government policy, said.

"We will be there in Afghanistan as long as the Afghans want us there," he said, pointing to the close historical and cultural links between the two countries.

New Delhi, which has repeatedly urged the global community to "stay the course" in Afghanistan, is worried about Pakistan and the Islamist Taliban assuming key roles once foreign troops begin their pullout.

"Obviously we are concerned about any cut-and-run," the source said, referring to plans by the US-led forces in Afghanistan to start their draw-down from July 2011.

"The Taliban are emboldened by the international community seeking an early exit," he said.

"We are also definitely concerned that efforts are on to outsource peace and stability to a country (Pakistan) that is responsible for causing this mess in Afghanistan," the source added.

About 4,000 Indians are building roads, sanitation projects and power lines in the volatile country. India is also building the new Afghan parliament.

On Wednesday, a Mumbai court finished hearings in the trial of a Pakistani accused of being the sole surviving gunman from the Mumbai attacks, Mohammed Ajmal Kasab.

The public prosecutor in the trial, Ujjwal Nikam, believes that he has overwhelmingly

proved the links between 22-year-old Kasab, the LeT and the Pakistani army. A verdict is due on May 3.

The LeT is also accused of targeting Indian security forces in Indian-administered Kashmir and was also blamed for an attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001 that brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war.