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U.S. Blames Kabul Assault on Pakistan-Based Group

By Alissa J. Rubin, Ray Rivera

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KABUL — The American ambassador to Afghanistan said on Wednesday that the Haqqani network appeared to be responsible for the assault against the United States Embassy in Kabul and nearby NATO bases. But he played down the attack as harassment rather than a major military strike.

“This really is not a very big deal, a hard day for the embassy and my staff, who behaved with enormous courage and dedication,” the ambassador, Ryan C. Crocker, said. Mr. Crocker brushed off the significance of the attack, which began Tuesday afternoon and stretched into the next day, calling it “a half a dozen R.P.G. rounds from 800 meters away.”

“If that’s the best they can do, you know, I think it’s actually a statement of their weakness,” he said.

Sediq Sediqi, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry, said that eight people were killed in the assault — four police officers and four civilians — and that 17 civilians had been wounded. Six coalition soldiers were also wounded, three by rocket-propelled grenades that landed in a military installation near the NATO headquarters, officials said. Another three were killed overnight as coalition forces cleared an unfinished 11-story building in central Kabul where the attackers had holed up, said a NATO spokesman, Lt. Col. Jimmie E. Cummings Jr.

Dozens of Afghans gathered outside that building on Wednesday to watch the police remove the attackers' bodies and recount their stories of listening to the siege, which ended after 19 hours of intense gunfire. Though the streets were once again open and vendors were grilling meat and corn in the building's shadow, there remained a sense of insecurity among men who said they neither supported the insurgents nor trusted the police to keep them safe.

"We are mad at both," said Farid Hotak, "at the Taliban for doing these types of attacks, and at the government for failing to prevent them." Mr. Hotak, who lives in an apartment across the street from the 11-story building, seethed at the memory of girls crying and running for cover. "Fear and panic rules," he said.

Mr. Crocker indicated that such attacks were likely to continue because the insurgency had strong support in Pakistan, where the Haqqani network is based.

"You can't keep every evildoer out of the city. You do have an insurgency that's going on in the country. It's particularly hard to do when you have safe havens. And the information available to us is that these attackers, like those who carried out the bombing in Wardak are part of the Haqqani network," said Mr. Crocker, referring to a truck bombing on Sunday.

The Haqqani network, a key ally and protector of Al Qaeda's top leadership in Pakistan's remote border region, is one of the United States military's fiercest foes in Afghanistan and has links to the Afghan Taliban. American intelligence officials say the group was responsible for attacks in Kabul in 2008 against a hotel and the Indian Embassy.

"It's in the long-term interest of Pakistan, as well as Afghanistan and the international community led by the United States, to bring these groups under control," the ambassador said. "Having spent time in Pakistan, I am aware of the challenges they face." Mr. Crocker served as a senior diplomat in Pakistan before becoming the ambassador in Kabul.

Colonel Cummings, the NATO spokesman, also minimized the attack's significance, calling it another failed military operation for the Taliban.

"All that is accomplished in these kinds of attacks we've seen lately is high media coverage of them murdering and terrorizing innocent Afghan people," he said.

Police officers and the Afghan National Army finished going through the 11-story building at 8:30 a.m. Wednesday, and by late morning were fingerprinting the attackers, six of whom were killed in the building. There were at least three other attackers in Kabul on Tuesday, according to the Interior Ministry.

The attackers found in the building were wearing sandals and the traditional Afghan loose trousers and shirts known as shaalwar kameez. A few hours after the firefight ended, the attackers' bodies still lay on a high floor. All appeared to be young, no older than 25, and one looked perhaps even younger. The fighters had enough ammunition to keep shooting until the final attacker was killed on Wednesday, and they appeared to also have bottled water and fruit juice, police officers said.

The youngest fighter had tried to surrender, but the others would not let him, said Mr. Sediqi.

An Afghan Army sergeant, Mohammed Daoud, who spent Tuesday afternoon shooting at the attackers from a copse of trees across the road, returned on Wednesday with dozens of other security officers to inspect the bloody remains of the attack and look at the militants' bodies. Sergeant Daoud said the presence of Western forces was to blame for the attack, and that he had no idea how the police or the army could prevent the next one.

"It's so difficult to stop these suicide bombers," Sergeant Daoud said. "Ordinary people have a better chance of stopping them than Afghan security forces."

The Interior Ministry also suggested that the attackers had tried to conceal themselves by dressing as women, saying they had found burqas — the face-covering robes worn by many Afghan women — inside the building. Police officials have claimed in the past that militants don the full-body coverings to move without being recognized.

The attack may further weaken trust in the government by showing the Taliban can still outmaneuver, even if for only a few hours, both the Afghan forces and the Western coalition.

With the Obama administration facing mounting budget problems and having fixed a timetable to withdraw most forces by 2014, the assault also appeared to signal the Taliban's resolve to battle Western forces until the hour of the Americans' exit. A Western official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the attack made the talk of a peace deal with the Taliban seem absurd.

The assault was all the more dismaying because it suggested that the insurgents had the support of many people along the way who had allowed the heavily armed men to enter the city and pass unhindered through the rings of security and checkpoints near the capital's center.