

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Reuters

Afghan Taliban on offensive ahead of Western pullout

By Sanjeev Miglani

09/14/2011

Kabul - First a night-time attack on the hilltop InterContinental Hotel in June, then a dawn assault on the British Council last month and on Tuesday a shower of rockets into the U.S. embassy in Kabul, kicking off a 20-hour siege of a half-finished high-rise.

The string of Taliban attacks on sensitive, well-guarded targets in the Afghan capital have been a powerful, frightening, show of strength at a time when NATO-led forces are claiming significant security gains across the country.

Diplomats and the military have dismissed them as failures, because they ended with the attackers dead.

U.S. ambassador Ryan Crocker described the most recent attacks as more "harassment" than assault, and the top U.S. and NATO Commander in Afghanistan, General John Allen, told journalists the attack "had no operational impact whatsoever."

But men who go into a battle wearing suicide-bomb vests are not looking to hold targets permanently.

"The importing of the violence again to the capital was intended from the beginning to be a message that the Taliban remains an important force to be reckoned with," said Jonathan Eyal, Director of International Studies at the Royal United Services Institute in London.

That six -- and eventually just two -- insurgents could hold off an assault team including Apache helicopter gunships made foreign and Afghan forces look weak and ill-prepared.

That the group could evade checkpoints by throwing on burqas, the traditional face-covering robe worn by Afghan women, and apparently stash ammunition at their chosen holdout, was a further embarrassment.

And a night of gunfire and explosions, in a capital the government and the West have promised to secure, further undermined the confidence of an already war-weary population.

"It's clear the war is being lost," Tarak Barkawi, senior lecturer in war studies at Britain's Cambridge University.

"Security is not what one might imagine for Western powers looking to develop an exit strategy that depends on the quality of Afghan forces."

VIETNAM MEMORIES?

The attacks have come just as Western forces prepare to leave as part of a plan to hand over responsibilities to the Afghan forces by 2014, prompting some to draw comparisons with the 1968 Tet Offensive during the Vietnam War.

Attacks by thousands of fighters on cities in South Vietnam and the once impregnable U.S. embassy in Saigon were repelled but helped alter the course of the war by unsettling its backers and exposing claims that America was winning.

There were no foreign casualties in embassies or NATO military compounds during the Kabul attack, but six or seven rockets landed inside the perimeter of the U.S. embassy, and one injured Afghans queueing for visas.

Crocker played down the attack, saying it was nothing like what the U.S. faced in Vietnam.

"This really is not a very big deal, a hard day for the Embassy and my staff, who behaved with enormous courage and dedication, but look, you know a half a dozen RPG rounds from 800 meters away that isn't Tet, that's harassment," he said in an interview transcript provided to journalists.

But least 11 Afghan civilians were killed, three of them children, in a total of four attacks the insurgents mounted across Kabul beginning with the assault on the heart of the diplomatic enclave. Suicide bombers struck in three other areas.

And those Afghans who live near the half-finished high-rise the insurgents used as their base endured a terrifying night of gunfire and explosions.

"It's the psychological impact ... of a few deaths that is important for the Taliban. It's a political and symbolic message," said Karim Pakzad, a researcher at international relations think tank IRIS in Paris.

"The Taliban have struck psychologically and shown that there is no solution in Afghanistan without them."

NO CHANGE TO NATO PLAN

The building where the attackers were based is just 1 km (0.6 mile) from the presidential palace and the U.S. embassy. It is even closer to the offices of several key Afghan intelligence directorates and the Ministry of Defense.

The site is also inside several rings of checkpoints meant to secure the heart of the city, so the size of the attackers' ammunition stocks raised immediate suspicions of corruption or collusion by security forces.

The militants who struck on Tuesday were armed with rocket-propelled grenade launchers, AK-47 assault rifles and suicide-bomb vests, a Taliban spokesman said.

"There would have had to have been quite significant cooperation for a team like this to get into the building they were shooting from," said Cambridge University's Tarak.

"They would also have been stockpiling weapons in that building for quite some time to be able to fight that long."

This type of corruption, and the slow process of clearing just 6 insurgents from a building, mean attacks like these add to Afghan worries about the departure of foreign forces -- even though many also resent a presence seen as heavy handed.

But with the Afghan war increasingly unpopular with electorates back home, NATO is unlikely to slow its exit plans.

Karl-Heinz Kamp, head of research at the NATO Defense College in Rome, said he did not expect the attacks to have any effect on the NATO plan for Afghanistan.

The gradual exit began with the handover of a six areas of the country in July, and may even be completed before deadline.

"Of course you will have the immediate reactions in terms of trying to strengthen security, but I don't see any tendency to say NATO should be out of there sooner."

"Transition wise, things are not rosy, because nothing can ever be rosy in Afghanistan, but they are not bad."