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Attacks on Foreigners in Capital Get Afghan Faction's Message Across

By ROD NORDLAND

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Every bomb, they say, has a return address.

When car bombs blew up in West Beirut, or explosions cut down worshipers in Sadr City mosques, survivors generally knew who was to blame, and more or less why — even when no one claimed responsibility.

So, too, with the suicide car bomb that on Saturday delivered the worst blow that NATO forces have suffered yet in Kabul, smashing into an armored bus full of troops and killing 13 foreigners, most of them Americans, and at least 4 Afghans.

The Taliban immediately claimed responsibility, but Afghan and American officials suspect that, more specifically, it was the fearsome Haqqani faction, whose fighters have proved better trained and organized than many Taliban, and which in recent months especially has focused its attacks on military targets rather than civilian ones.

The message the Haqqanis are sending — to the world and, especially, to the Afghan public — is that they are willing and able to kill foreign troops. And with the Haqqani bombs comes a particularly troublesome return address: Pakistan, where the group is based.

One Western diplomat, speaking on the condition of anonymity under diplomatic ground rules, said it was clear that if the Haqqanis were behind the attack, the militants were reacting to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's recent trip to Pakistan. During the visit, she again demanded that the government do something about the Haqqanis, whose bases are in the Pakistani territory of North Waziristan.

“No one goes to this much trouble if they don't think you'll get the message,” the diplomat said.

An Afghan political analyst, Haroun Mir, agreed. “These are planned attacks in response to the pressure from the United States on Pakistan against the Haqqani network,” Mr. Mir said. Beyond that, he added, “the Pakistanis are sending another message, too: They are not willing to abandon their support of the Taliban.”

Brig. Gen. Carsten Jacobson, the spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, said Sunday in an interview that many of the so-called spectacular attacks in Kabul in recent months had been clearly linked to the Haqqani network. He described the group as “a criminal clan, like a Sicilian family clan, who are into criminal activity of all types, drug dealing, smuggling as well as insurgency.” He added that it had been badly hit by coalition raids and arrests this year.

Lutfullah Mashal, the spokesman for the National Directorate of Security, the Afghan intelligence service, said about the bombing on Saturday: “Usually these things are the Haqqani network. Kabul is their area of operation, and all the signs and indications point to the Haqqani network.”

With the surge in American forces this year, Taliban dominance of many areas in Afghanistan's south has been ended, forcing them to find other ways to fight back, General Jacobson said. “We see less and less capability to actually face us,” he said, “so there's an increased use of I.E.D.'s and assassinations, and we can call them spectacular attacks, attacks that are simply laid on to make it a big story in the media.” (I.E.D. is the abbreviation for improvised explosive device.)

Since the summer, there has been a string of such attacks in the Kabul region, most characterized by complex assaults using suicide bombers or multiple attackers and acting on considerable intelligence about the target.

The Hotel Intercontinental was hit in June, followed by the British Council, a cultural relations agency, in August on Afghanistan's Independence Day, the celebration of the end of British rule.

In September, seven insurgents with sniper rifles, an 84-millimeter recoilless rifle and rocket-propelled grenades, among other weapons, attacked the American Embassy and the ISAF headquarters next door, using a perch in a hotel under construction and possibly pre-positioned ammunition caches. A week later, the former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani was assassinated; he was the head of the High Peace Council, charged with reconciliation talks with the Taliban.

On Thursday, another complex attack was launched in Kandahar on the Provincial Reconstruction Team, a largely American group that is helping to distribute aid money as part of the war effort.

Afghan officials have placed blame for all of those save the Rabbani assassination directly on the Haqqanis.

General Jacobson pointed out that all of those attacks had missed their aim to some degree: none killed Americans or other foreign allies who were targeted. Most victims were Afghan civilians and police officers. At the British Council, no one inside was killed, although a New Zealand commando among the responders died. In the embassy attack, 20 died, but none were inside the compound, and none were Americans or other NATO forces. In Kandahar, an Afghan interpreter was killed.

Still, the general added, the insurgents gained something: "They were not effective militarily, but they gained a lot of publicity."

And that facet of the war remains crucial, with the players all fighting for position, and the public eye, as the clock ticks toward the planned American military withdrawal in 2014.

"This is a war of perception," said Mahmoud Saikal, a former Afghan deputy foreign minister and a political activist. "The shift to urban warfare and suicide attacks in urban areas gives them lots of propaganda."

In that sense, killing a considerable number of Americans, especially in the glare of publicity in the Afghan capital, is a notable success.

“Well, it hurt. Put it like that,” General Jacobson said. Still, he added, the attack consisted of one man in a car, and it is unclear whether the attacker just happened on his target or had information that led him to it.

“This could be a target of opportunity or a planned attack,” the general said. “We will have to find out. It might turn out that he just had a stroke of luck.”

Shukria Barakzai, the chairwoman of the Afghan Parliament’s Defense Committee, believes it was much more likely that the attacker had specific intelligence about where and when to strike. “That’s impossible, to just cruise for a target. There are too many checkpoints, and heavy cars are quite visible,” she said, adding: “Other intelligence services have to be behind this. They are choosing Kabul because there’s lots of media, and they are shaking NATO’s door here.”

Like many Afghan politicians, she has no doubt about either the message or who sent it.