

# Attacks Rock Afghan Capital, Provinces

BY HEIDI VOGT AND RAHIM FAIEZ  
 Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Taliban insurgents struck the heart of the Afghan capital and three eastern cities Sunday, firing automatic weapons and grenades at embassies, government buildings and NATO bases as they launched the spring fighting season with the boldest and most complex assault in years.

The multi-pronged attacks show the Taliban and their allies are far from beaten and underscored the security challenge facing government forces as U.S. and NATO forces draw down. The majority of international combat troops are scheduled to leave by the end of 2014.

The first blasts rocked the diplomatic quarter of Kabul on Sunday afternoon, and soon gunshots and rocket-propelled grenade fire were ringing out across the city. Smoke rose over the skyline as sirens wailed. A loudspeaker at the U.S. Embassy could be heard barking: "Duck and cover. Move away from the windows."

One police officer and 17 militants were killed in the attacks, the most widespread in the Afghan capital since an assault on the U.S. Embassy and NATO headquarters last September blamed on the Haqqani network, a Pakistan-based insurgent group allied with the Taliban. Fighting continued more than 12 hours after the first blasts, with explosions echoing into the night.

The sophistication and firepower of the latest strikes, as well as the high-profile government and foreign targets, bore the hallmarks of the attack last fall and others carried out by Haqqani insurgents.

As in the earlier attack, armed insurgents took over half-built buildings Sunday and used them to fire down on nearby embassies and bases. In the streets of Kabul's Wazir Akbar Khan neighborhood, where a NATO base and a number of embassies, including the U.S. Embassy, are located, residents scrambled for cover as gunfire rained down from all directions.

"I saw two Land Cruisers pull up and two militants jumped from the car," said Mohammad Zakar, a 27-year-old mechanic who has a shop near the building commandeered by the militants. "They opened fire on an intelligence service guard ... They also fired and



JONATHAN S. LANDAY/MCT

Insurgents took over a high-rise building on Sunday, and began firing rocket propelled grenades and assault weapons at government buildings and towards the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, news reports and officials said. There were no immediate reports of casualties in what appeared to be a strike mirroring an attack on the heavily fortified American mission in September.

killed an Afghan policeman and then they jumped into the building. All the shops closed. I ran away."

Across town at the parliament building, insurgents climbed to the upper floors of another empty building and fired on lawmakers below. A few legislators climbed on the roof of the parliament and fired back.

Militants also attacked a NATO site on the outskirts of Kabul, where a joint Greek-Turkish base came under heavy fire and forces responded with heavy-caliber machine guns. A police officer said a suicide bomber inside a building near the base was shooting toward the Kabul Military Training Center.

The eastern cities of Jalalabad, Gardez and Pul-e-Alam also came under attack, with suicide bombers trying to storm NATO bases.

Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said dozens of suicide attackers and gunmen were sent into four provinces in an assault that had been planned for two months to show the extent of the insurgency's power after NATO commanders called the Taliban weak and said there was no indication they were planning a spring offensive.

"We are strong and we can attack anywhere we want," Mujahid said, calling the attacks an opening

salvo ahead of the yearly spring offensive, when warmer weather typically brings increased attacks.

The near-simultaneous assaults were the latest blow to an international effort that has been on edge for months as distrust grew between international and Afghan forces following the release of a video purporting to show Marines urinating on Taliban corpses, as well as the burning of Qurans at a U.S. base and a deadly attack by a U.S. soldier that killed 17 Afghan villagers.

Those tensions had appeared to be subsiding in recent weeks and the relatively quiet start to spring had brought hope: a deal governing night raids, talks with the Hizb-i-Islami insurgent group and the appointment of a new head to the High Peace Council — which is trying to negotiate with the Taliban.

That quiet was shattered Sunday. More than a dozen explosions rocked Kabul and heavy gunfire crackled through the streets for hours.

At least one police officer was killed in Kabul, according to an AP photographer at the scene. Seventeen militant fighters also died, including four in Kabul, and two others were arrested, the Interior Ministry said. Seventeen police officers and 14 civilians were wounded in attacks across

four provinces.

Lt. Col. Jimmie Cummings, a spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition, said the U.S., German and British embassies and some coalition and Afghan government buildings took direct and indirect fire.

U.S. Marine Gen. John Allen, the top commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, said the coalition was standing by to support the Afghan forces, if needed but had not been called in.

Some international forces could be seen taking part in operations to secure and retake buildings in the capital — NATO troops embedded in Afghan units as "trainers" or "mentors."

Explosions caused minor damage to the German Embassy grounds, but no staff were injured, German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said in Berlin.

The shooters appeared to be focusing on the nearby British Embassy, which also suffered "limited damage," according to British Foreign Secretary William Hague. He said all staff were safe.

Mujahid said the Kabul attacks targeted NATO headquarters, the British and German embassies, the Afghan parliament building, two hotels, and other sites along Darulaman road, where the Russian Embassy is located.

U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker said Sunday's attacks showed why the U.S. should not try to hasten the exit from Afghanistan.

At nearly the same time as the Kabul attacks, Taliban fighters launched assaults on Afghan and NATO installations in the capitals of Nangarhar, Logar and Pakhtia provinces.

In Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar province, two groups of militants — some wearing burqas to disguise themselves as women — launched separate attacks on a military airfield used by NATO and Afghan forces, as well as a smaller NATO base nearby. The ministry said Afghan security forces gunned down all four of the militants.

In Logar province, south of Kabul, five militants occupied a building under construction and started firing, the ministry said. Three police were wounded when the insurgents, who were all shot and killed, threw hand grenades on policemen responding to the scene. Four civilians also were wounded in the attack.

## Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Suffers Setback

CAIRO (AP) — The elimination of three of the main contenders from Egypt's presidential race has eroded the chances of an Islamist candidate to seize the country's top job.

The Muslim Brotherhood, the most powerful political group to emerge from last year's uprising, finds itself increasingly in a bind. It is unable to exercise the power of its electoral wins so far and is jostling with the ruling generals and liberal and secular groups that drove the uprising but now fear religious domination of politics.

The Brotherhood was outraged over the election commission's decision late Saturday to bar its chief strategist and leading choice for president, Khairat el-Shater. It threatened more protests like a large march on Friday that drew tens of thousands of Islamists to Cairo's Tahrir Square.

"This is a political decision not a legal one, said Murad Mohammed Ali, a spokesman for el-Shater's campaign. "This commission is politicized and we will exert all political pressures to restore our rights."

The election commission disqualified 10 candidates from the May 23-24 vote including el-Shater and a popular, more hardline Islamist from another party, Hazem Abu Ismail. Omar Suleiman, who was ousted President Hosni Mubarak's long-time spy chief and only vice president, was also barred.

## Obama: Trade Deal Includes Worker Protection

CARTAGENA, Colombia (AP) — President Barack Obama is praising the free trade agreement between the United States and Colombia, saying it includes protections for workers and the environment that will serve as a "win" for both countries.

Obama and Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos said at a joint news conference that the trade deal will go into effect May 15.

The U.S. and Colombia agreed to the trade deal last year. But implementation of the pact was contingent on Colombia enacting reforms to protect unions.

Obama says it will support "thousands of U.S. jobs" and give Colombia a market for exports. He says it will be a win for workers and the environment because there are "strong protections." Obama says those are "commitments that we are going to fulfill."

Business leaders support the agreement but labor leaders say Colombia still has a poor record of violence against labor union members.

## Issa: Doubts S. S. Scandal Was One-Time Lapse

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Secret Service scandal involving prostitutes in Colombia that has overshadowed President Barack Obama's diplomatic mission in Latin America probably isn't an isolated incident, and the agency should ensure it doesn't happen again, a leading House Republican said Sunday.

California Rep. Darrell Issa, chairman of a House investigative panel, said he wasn't certain whether Congress would hold hearings on the misconduct. But lawmakers will be looking "over the shoulder" of the Secret Service, he said, to make sure that the agency's method for training and screening agents isn't endangering the nation's VIPs.

"Things like this don't happen once if they didn't happen before," said Issa, who leads the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

Eleven Secret Service employees are on administrative leave for misconduct and five service members assigned to work with the agency are confined to quarters amid allegations that a group of personnel partied with prostitutes before Obama arrived in Colombia for the weekend summit with Latin American leaders.

## Leader Vows Military Strength In First Speech

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — North Korea's new leader addressed his nation and the world for the first time Sunday, vowing to place top priority on his impoverished country's military, which promptly unveiled a new long-range missile.

The speech was the culmination of two weeks of celebrations marking the centenary of the birth of his grandfather, national founder Kim Il Sung — festivities that were marred by a failed launch Friday of a rocket that generated international condemnation and cost North Korea a food aid-for-nuclear-freeze deal with Washington.

Kim Jong Un's speech took North Koreans gathered at Kim Il Sung Square and around televisions across the country by surprise. His father, late leader Kim Jong Il, addressed the public only once in his lifetime.

Appearing calm and measured as he read the 20-minute speech, Kim Jong Un covered a wide range of topics, from foreign policy to the economy. His speech, and a military parade that followed, capped the carefully choreographed festivities commemorating Kim Il Sung's birthday.

# Obama: U.S. Has Offered No 'Freebies' To Iran

BY JULIE PACE  
 Associated Press

CARTAGENA, Colombia — Exposing a rift with Israel, President Barack Obama on Sunday insisted that the U.S. had not "given anything away" in new talks with Iran as he defended his continued push for a diplomatic resolution to the dispute over Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

Obama said he refused to let the talks turn into a "stalling process," but believed there was still a window for diplomacy. Earlier Sunday, Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly disagreed with at least part of that strategy, saying the U.S. and world powers gave Tehran a "freebie" by agreeing to hold more talks next month.

"So far at least we haven't given away anything, other than the opportunity for us to negotiate and see if Iran comes to the table in good faith," Obama said during a news conference Sunday in Colombia, as he closed a diplomatic mission to Latin America. But Obama warned, "The clock's ticking."

Winding down his three day trip in the port city of Cartagena, Obama also sought to offer hope for fresh start with Cuba, saying the U.S. would welcome the communist-run island's transition to democracy. There could be an opportunity for such a shift to take place in the coming years, Obama said.

Standing alongside Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, Obama also proclaimed a free trade agreement between their countries as a "win-win." Obama announced that the trade pact can be fully enforced next month, now that Colombia has enacted a series of protections for workers and labor unions.

Obama had hoped to keep his trip to Colombia for the Summit of the Americas focused on the economy and the prospect of the region's rapid economic rise as a growth opportunity for American businesses. But that message was quickly overshadowed by an alleged prostitution scandal involving Secret Service personnel who were in Colombia to set up security for Obama's trip.

The president said Sunday that he expected a full, rigorous investigation of the allegations, and said he would be angry if the accusations turn out to be true.

As Obama was meeting with Latin American leaders in Colombia this weekend, negotiators from the U.S. and five other world powers were in Turkey for a fresh

round of nuclear talks with Iran.

While previous talks have done little to dissuade Iran from moving forward on its nuclear program, diplomats called the latest negotiations constructive and useful. Both sides agreed to hold more talks in Baghdad at the end of May.

The Israeli prime minister balked at the announcement of more talks, saying the intervening five weeks would simply give Iran more time to continue enriching uranium without restric-

tions. Netanyahu has said Iran uses diplomatic negotiations as a diversion while it continues to pursue a nuclear weapon.

Israel has raised the prospect of a preemptive military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. The Obama administration has urgently sought to hold off Israeli military action, which would likely result in the U.S. being pulled into a conflict as well. The U.S. believes a combination of diplomacy and crippling economic sanctions could push Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

Obama reaffirmed his commitment to that approach Sunday, saying it was "absolutely the right thing to do."

Iran insists its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes and says it does not seek a bomb.

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