

Taliban Chief Vows 'Amazing' Attack on Washington 'Soon'

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DERA ISMAIL KHAN, Pakistan

The commander of the Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility Tuesday for a deadly assault on a Pakistani police academy and said the group was planning a terrorist attack on the White House that would "amaze" the world.

Baitullah Mehsud, who has a \$5 million bounty on his head from the U.S., said Monday's attack on the outskirts of the eastern city of Lahore was retaliation for U.S. missile strikes against militants along the Afghan border.

"Soon we will launch an attack in Washington that will amaze everyone in the world," Mehsud told The Associated Press by phone. He provided no details.

Mehsud has never been directly linked to any attacks outside Pakistan, but attacks blamed on his network of fighters have widened in scope and ambition in recent years. The threat comes days after President Barack Obama warned that Al Qaeda is actively planning attacks on the United States from secret havens in Pakistan.

[View photos from the attack on Pakistan police academy](#)

Pakistan's former government and the CIA named Mehsud as the prime suspect behind the December 2007 killing of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Pakistani officials accuse him of harboring foreign fighters, including Central Asians linked to Al Qaeda, and of training suicide bombers.

In his latest comments, Mehsud identified the White House as one of the targets in an interview with local Dewa Radio, a copy of which was obtained by the AP.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Gordon Duguid said he had not seen any reports of Mehsud's comments but that he would "take the threat under consideration."

Mehsud also claimed responsibility for a suicide car bombing that killed four soldiers Monday in Bannu district and a suicide attack targeting a police station in Islamabad last week that killed one officer.

Such attacks pose a major test for the weak, year-old civilian administration of Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari that has been gripped with political turmoil in recent weeks.

An Interior Ministry spokesman said it was too early to respond to Mehsud's claim, but the Interior Ministry chief said Monday that authorities had information linking the attack to Mehsud. He said at least one of the attackers arrived in Lahore about 15 days ago from Mehsud's stronghold of South Waziristan near the border with Pakistan and rented a house.

The gunmen who attacked the police academy killed seven police and two civilians, holding security forces at bay for about eight hours before being overpowered by Pakistani commandos. Some of the attackers wore police uniforms, and they took hostages and tossed grenades during the assault.

Earlier Tuesday, a spokesman from a little-known militant group linked to the Pakistani Taliban also claimed responsibility for the attack and a similar ambush-style attack against the Sri Lankan cricket team earlier this month in Lahore. It was not immediately possible to reconcile the two claims.

Omar Farooq, who said he is the spokesman for Fedayeen al-Islam, said the group would carry out more attacks unless Pakistani troops withdraw from tribal areas near the Afghan border and the U.S. stops its drone strikes. The group previously said it was behind the deadly September bombing of the Marriott hotel in Islamabad that killed 54 people.

Mehsud declined to comment on Fedayeen al-Islam's claim that it carried out the attack or to say whether the group is linked to his own. The Pakistani Taliban leader also said he was not deterred by the U.S. bounty on his head: "I wish to die and embrace martyrdom."

The AP has spoken to Mehsud several times in the past and recognized his voice, and a request for an interview with Mehsud was submitted through his aide. The militant leader also granted phone interviews to other media organizations.

The Pakistani Taliban has links with Al Qaeda and Afghan Taliban militants who have launched attacks against U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan from a base in the border region between the two countries.

Pakistan faces tremendous U.S. pressure to eradicate militants from its soil and has launched several military operations in the Afghan border region.

The U.S. has stepped up drone attacks against militants in the area, causing tension with Pakistani officials who protest they are a violation of the country's sovereignty and kill innocent civilians.

Monday's highly coordinated attack highlighted that militants in the country pose a threat far outside the border region. It prompted Interior Ministry chief Rehman Malik, Pakistan's top civilian security official, to say that militant groups were "destabilizing the country."

After gunmen stormed the academy, masses of security forces surrounded the compound, exchanging fire in televised scenes reminiscent of the militant siege in the Indian city of Mumbai in November and the attack on Sri Lanka's cricket team.

Officials Tuesday were still trying to sort out how many attackers were involved, giving varying accounts to the media.

A senior Lahore police investigator, Zulfikar Hameed, told the AP that three of the attackers blew themselves up when commandos retook the police academy and one was shot by security forces. Hameed said it was difficult to say precisely how many militants carried out the attack and some may have escaped.

Tasneem Qureshi, a top official at the Interior Ministry, told an Express News TV that four attackers were in custody and "one, who was wounded, managed to escape."

Punjab police chief, Khawaja Khalid Farooq, said one of the captured militants had provided useful information and that about 50 other people in Lahore were detained overnight for questioning.

http://www.foxnews.com/prINTER_friendly_story/0,3566,511740,00.html