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Afghans seize 10,000 kilograms of explosives smuggled from Pakistan, foil alleged attack

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Afghan security forces have arrested five militants with 10,000 kilograms (22,000 pounds) of explosives that they smuggled in from Pakistan to carry out a massive attack in Kabul, as well as another three suspects allegedly planning to assassinate the vice president, an official said Saturday.

The reports of new planned attacks in the Afghan capital came a week after militants said to be part of the Pakistan-based Haqqani group launched coordinated assaults in the heart of Kabul and in three other cities.

U.S. officials say they have stepped up pressure on Islamabad to crack down on the Haqqanis, who specializes in high-profile strikes against well-protected targets.

Three of the five men arrested with the explosives were members of the Pakistani Taliban, while the other two belonged to the Afghan Taliban, National Director for Security spokesman Shafiqullah Tahiry told reporters. He said the men's orders came from militant leaders with ties to Pakistani intelligence. He did not say when the arrests took place, nor what their intended target was.

Tahiry said the seized explosives were packed in 400 bags and hidden under potatoes loaded in a truck with Pakistani license plates.

The men confessed that they “had planned to carry out a terrorist attack in a key point in Kabul city,” Tahiry said.

He provided a DVD showing images of the truck and the recorded confessions of the men, but did not provide other proof to back up the claims.

He said that the three Pakistani members of the group picked up the explosives just outside the Pakistani city of Peshawar, and were under the orders of two local Taliban leaders named Noor Afzal and Mohammad Omar, who Tahiry said had ties with the country’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency, or ISI.

Tahiry also said that security forces had foiled an assassination attempt by the Haqqani network against Afghan Vice President Mohammed Karim Khalili.

He said three Afghan men arrested on April 15, the day the Kabul attacks began, planned to kill Khalili at his home. They were equipped with suicide vests and small arms.

According to Tahiry, the order to kill Khalili was issued in Miram Shah by Haqqani network commander Badruddin Haqqani, the son of the group’s founder, Jalaluddin Haqqani. Last May, the U.S. designated Badruddin a terrorist.

Afghan officials often blame Pakistan and the ISI for supporting militant groups — including the Haqqani network — in the country’s lawless areas along the Afghan border. The Pakistani government has vehemently denied any such claims.

Last Sunday’s coordinated assaults included near-simultaneous attacks in the three parts of the capital and three other eastern cities. Eight policemen and three civilians were killed in 18 hours of fighting, along with 36 militants, according to Afghan officials.

On Thursday the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker said that there was “no question” that the Haqqani network was behind that attack and said Pakistan needed to do more to clamp down on the group’s safe havens.

The comments were the strongest yet from a U.S. official blaming that incident on the Haqqani network.

Washington has long demanded that Pakistan target the Haqqani network. They are seen as more ideologically tied to al-Qaida than some of the other militant groups, and they have been particularly adept at sophisticated strikes like the one this week. The group was also blamed for a similar attack in September in which militants took over a half-constructed high-rise in the capital and opened fire on the nearby NATO headquarters and U.S. Embassy with heavy weapons.