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Reuters

Top Indian diplomat in Afghanistan after blast

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India's top diplomat inspected the site of a huge bomb attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul on Friday but declined to assign blame for a strike that has renewed focus on India's tense relations with Pakistan.

India has in the past accused Pakistan's ISI spy agency of being behind attacks on Indian interests in Afghanistan. An attack on the same Kabul embassy last year killed 58 people.

Thursday's blast killed 17 people but harmed no embassy staff. The Taliban claimed responsibility. Pakistan condemned it.

Separately, U.S. forces said on Friday they had abandoned remote outposts in the east of the country near the Pakistani border, six days after Taliban fighters stormed the positions, killing eight Americans.

The withdrawal was part of a strategy by top NATO and U.S. commander General Stanley McChrystal to redeploy from remote areas to population centers. Fighters have frequently responded to such moves with attacks designed to assert control of areas after U.S. forces pull out.

This year has seen a dramatic rise of violence in Afghanistan where 100,000 Western troops, two-thirds of them American, are battling to contain an increasingly fierce insurgency.

In Washington, U.S. officials said the White House had been presented with intelligence estimating that Taliban-led forces battling U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan had grown nearly four-fold in the past four years to roughly 25,000 from 7,000.

U.S. President Barack Obama had a strategy session with his national security team at the White House on Friday that was expected to discuss a request by the U.S. military to send up to 40,000 more troops to Afghanistan next year.

Obama, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday, has already ordered 21,000 extra troops to Afghanistan this year and is wrestling with deploying more at a time when U.S. public support is fading for the war effort.

The White House did not give details of what was discussed during the 2 1/2-hour session but said resources were among the topics.

"The president had a robust conversation about the security and political challenges in Afghanistan and the options for building a strategic approach going forward," the White House said, adding discussions would continue on Wednesday.

The Taliban mocked Obama's peace award. Spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said he "should have won the 'Nobel Prize for escalating violence and killing civilians.'"

FORTIFIED COMPOUND

In the Afghan capital, Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao declined to make any accusations as she toured the heavily fortified embassy compound, its premises littered with broken glass and debris from the blast that wounded up to 80 people.

"I think the investigation should be completed," she said when asked if India thought Pakistan was behind the attack.

"Whoever is responsible for this attack is against peace, is against democracy, is against people of Afghanistan and against the people of India," said Rao, India's most senior professional diplomat, who reports to Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna.

Embassy officials said she was also meeting Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Foreign Minister Ranganath Kambam.

Analysts have highlighted India-Pakistan rivalry as a factor that could complicate efforts to stabilize the region.

"It is clear that India's growing role in Afghanistan will draw counter measures that will complicate all efforts to bring peace," said Ashok Mehta, a retired Indian army general.

"The Americans ... are being told to rein in India, otherwise the India-Pakistan rivalry is going to be a drain on all efforts to stabilize Afghanistan."

In his August report, McChrystal said the ISI may have links to the Afghan Taliban and warned that Islamabad could retaliate for perceived close ties between Kabul and its foes in Delhi.

Khadim Hussain, of the Aryana Institute think tank in Islamabad, said militants were seeking to stoke tension between nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan: "It's a strategy of the Taliban and al Qaeda to destabilize the region by bringing about rifts within the ranks of the regional countries."

Pakistan is enmeshed in its own struggle against Islamist militants, underlined by a suspected suicide car bomb attack on Friday in Peshawar that killed 49 people.

Thursday's explosion in Kabul, which shattered buildings and shops on a busy street, has highlighted broader concerns about security in the Afghan capital.

Nur Muhammad, a Kabul resident whose shop was ruined in the blast, said he felt security was getting worse.

"I should've learned my lesson after the first explosion," he said. "But I thought things would improve. They only got worse and worse every day."