

Hitting Kabul

The U.S. is angry and ready to retaliate against terrorists. All eyes now turn to Afghanistan

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United States President George W. Bush's vow to bring to justice those responsible for Tuesday's carnage featured a chilling escalation of purpose: "We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbour them."

As he spoke, many people already believed that Washington would lay the blame squarely on Saudi terrorist Osama bin Laden, based in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. A number of current and former U.S. officials made bin Laden the prime suspect. A minority doubted that bin Laden was capable of orchestrating such a coordinated offensive. But though he has been lying low for the past year, there was never a doubt that bin Laden would strike at U.S. targets.

The ability of his Al'Qaeda organization to strike terror around the world is heavily dependent on the base it has built in Afghanistan and the support it draws from the Taliban and Pakistan's extremist Islamic groups. With the prospect of a massive and sustained U.S. military attack on Afghanistan, Western diplomats in Islamabad began making evacuation plans for their families. The United Nations began pulling out aid workers from Afghanistan the day after the U.S. bombings.

"It's the worst nightmare of the West, that bin Laden gets stronger, not weaker, in Afghanistan and virtually comes to rule the place," says a diplomat in Islamabad. "From there he can plan and organize strikes around the world."

Bin Laden has dozens if not hundreds of agents at the ready in the U.S. and Europe, many of whom are educated Arab militants who receive sophisticated training in bomb-making and communications in Afghanistan. In recent months, police in Europe arrested 20 residents suspected of planning to bomb the European parliament in Strasbourg.

But it is Afghanistan where bin Laden has the means, the freedom and space to build up his network. Al'Qaeda now has some 3,000 members from 12 different countries in Afghanistan who fight for the Taliban in the 055 Arab Brigade, which bin Laden finances and commands.

The U.S. attacks were preceded by several days by the attempted assassination of the anti-Taliban leader Ahmad Shah Masud, head of the opposition National Alliance, now known as the United Front. On September 9, two suicide bombers disguised as journalists set off an explosion during an interview with Masud at his base in northern Afghanistan. U.S. officials say Masud was killed; as the Review went to press, the United Front said he was still alive.

Abdullah Abdullah, the United Front's foreign minister, accused the Taliban, bin Laden and Pakistan of carrying out the attack on Masud—a charge the Taliban and Pakistan have denied.

"The operation against Masud was classic bin Laden: meticulously planned... with great technical ability in being able to conceal a bomb in a video-camera and carry it across the whole of Afghanistan before blowing it up," says a Western intelligence official in Central Asia.

Masud is or was the only holdout against total Taliban control of Afghanistan. With Masud incapacitated or dead, the fractious United Front would find it hard to hold together. However, hours after the attacks on New York and the Pentagon, the United Front launched a rocket attack on Kabul airport.

If bin Laden did have a role in the attack on Masud, he has won the eternal gratitude of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, and immeasurably strengthened his power and influence with the Taliban, who may have

had little choice but to allow bin Laden to carry out his U.S. strikes.

After the attack on Masud, Russia called for an emergency meeting of Indian, Iranian and Central Asian leaders in Tajikistan. They are likely to suggest more military aid for the United Front. They are also likely to discuss U.S. requests for airbases in Central Asia to be used to bomb bin Laden's bases in Afghanistan-which Washington first raised last October after the U.S. destroyer Cole was attacked in Yemen.

After the October incident, U.S. officials warned the Taliban that they would be held responsible for any acts of terrorism carried out by bin Laden. But the Bush administration has been delaying its promised new Afghanistan policy. Now the U.S. is suffering the consequences of that delay, with Afghanistan at the centre of global terrorism.