

US consulate attack in Libya: security lapses disclosed

The comparative lack of security at the US consulate in Benghazi was disclosed as officials admitted that it was only an "interim facility" with no bullet proof glass, reinforced doors or marine guard.



A burnt vehicle inside the US consulate compound in Benghazi Thursday following Tuesday night's deadly attack. Photo: Gianluigi Guercia/AFP/Getty Images

By Alex Spillius

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A senior US administration official said it was protected by was a "robust presence" of Libyan and US State Department security officers but conceded it was breached within minutes of the attack on Tuesday night.

Libyan army officers suggested that a rescue squad of eight American marines sent by helicopter from Tripoli to Benghazi but was inadequate.

Special forces Capt Fathi al-Obeidi said the combined US and Libyan force had been stunned by the scale of the attack on the consulate.

He had been told that about ten Americans needed evacuation but instead there were 37. One of the Americans who died was in the rescue force, he said.

The consulate opened as a liaison office to the Libyan opposition during the uprising against Col Muammar Gaddafi, said the US official.

Operating under "lock-and-key" security, below the level of defences of a permanent embassy, its status had not been upgraded despite a local Islamist group claiming responsibility for a night-time grenade attack in June.

A US official defended the arrangements, saying security in Benghazi included a local guard force outside the compound, and was "similar to the way we are postured all over the world" at similar facilities.

"We had a physical perimeter barrier and ... a robust American security presence inside the compound, including a strong component of regional security officers," said the official.

A routine security review had been completed before the anniversary of the September 11 attacks.

"And at that point, there was no information and there were no threat streams to indicate that we were insufficiently postured," she said.

A provisional official account of events said that 15 minutes after the first gunshots were fired at 10pm local time, the attackers were able to enter the compound and set the main building ablaze.

Mr Stevens, along information officer Sean Smith and a security guard sheltered in a safe room but were quickly driven out by smoke from the fire.

The group became separated and Mr Stevens, 52, and Mr Smith, a married father of two, died of smoke inhalation.

US and Libyan forces attempted to reclaim the compound at about 11.20pm but were repelled.

The gun battle continued and moved from the main compound to the complex's annex, where other staff members had retreated.

"It was during that time that two additional US personnel were killed and two others were wounded," the administration official said.

After four and a half hours US security personnel assisted by Libyan forces regained control of the entire compound. It was only then that Mr Stevens was found.

All remaining consulate staff were evacuated to the embassy in Tripoli, which will now be guarded by some of the 50 US marines dispatched by President Barack Obama.