

February 11, 2009 6:01 PM

No Americans Hurt In Embassy Attack

Islamic militants tried to storm the U.S. Embassy on Tuesday using automatic rifles, hand grenades and a van rigged with explosives, the Syrian government said. Four people were killed in the brazen attack, including three of the assailants, but no Americans were hurt.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack. An al Qaeda offshoot group called Jund al-Sham was suspected, said Syria's ambassador to the U.S., Imad Moustapha, in comments to an American television network. The radical fundamentalist group has been blamed for several attacks in Syria in recent years, he said.

"It does have the hallmark of an al Qaeda-type of attack, if we look at the fact that it seemed to be a vehicle, a bomb, with people inside, showing that it would be a suicide attack," Sajjan Gohel, terrorism analyst at the Asia-Pacific Foundation in London, told **CBS Radio News**.

The rigged canisters were almost identical to the makeshift bombs shown in a new video by a militant Islamic group circulating on the Internet, **CBS News correspondent Richard Roth** reports. But the life-saving difference in Damascus was that the canisters didn't detonate.

And protected by the Syrians' quick response, and the compound's high walls, the embassy wasn't hit and American diplomats weren't hurt.

Later Tuesday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice praised the work of Syrian security agents in repelling an attack against the U.S. Embassy in Damascus, but said it was too early to say who might have been behind it.

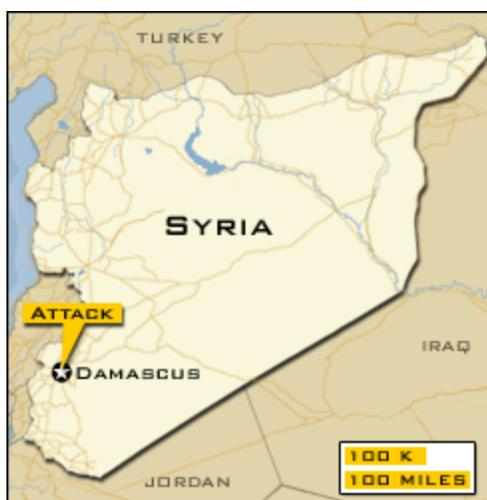
"I think it's very early to try and speculate why this may have happened," said Rice, speaking at a news conference in Nova Scotia Tuesday with her Canadian counterpart, Peter MacKay.

In the past, the Bush administration has been very critical of the tight control that the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad has over its people. But Rice would not speculate on whether the attack may be an indication that the regime's control is slipping.

In Washington, White House Press Secretary Tony Snow thanked the Syrian officials who assisted Americans after Islamic militants tried to storm the embassy.

"Syrian officials came to aid of the Americans," Snow told reporters. "The U.S. government is grateful for the assistance the Syrians provided in going after the attackers, and once again, that illustrates the importance of Syria being an important ally in the war on terror."

American authorities have long accused Syria of backing the insurgency in Iraq, and for arming the terror group Hezbollah in Lebanon. But U.S. officials hope in the aftermath of the attack, the two countries can possibly begin to work together to fight terrorism again, **CBS News' Charlie D'Agata** reports.



(CBS)

"It does not mean they are an ally. We are hoping they will become an ally and make the choice of fighting against terrorists," he added.

Snow said the administration does not know who is responsible for the attack.

"They're taking a look," he said. "There have been no claims of responsibility and we have not had an opportunity to dig down and find out. We just don't know."

The attack might also be a non-al Qaeda group, Gohel said.

"We know that the Syrian regime has allowed insurgents to cross back and forth to attack coalition troops. It also has harbored a lot of Hezbollah members in the past. We can't rule out the possibility that Hezbollah has played a role in this," Gohel said.

Authorities so far are saying nothing about the one terrorist captured alive — except that they're questioning him, **Roth** reports.

One of Syria's anti-terrorism forces was killed and 11 other people were wounded, the official news agency reported. The wounded including a police officer, two Iraqis and seven people employed at nearby technical workshop.

A Chinese diplomat also was hit in the face by shrapnel and slightly injured while standing on top of a garage at the Chinese Embassy, China's Foreign Ministry said. The diplomat, political counselor Li Hongyu, was in stable condition at a hospital, the ministry said.

A witness said a Syrian guard outside the U.S. Embassy also was killed, but the government did not immediately confirm that. As at most American embassies worldwide, a local guard force patrols outside the compound's walls while U.S. Marines are mostly responsible for guarding classified documents and fighting off attackers inside the compound.

Witnesses also said the gunmen tried to throw hand grenades into the embassy compound, shouting "Allahu akbar!" or "God is great!" It was not clear if any of the grenades made it over the walls, which are about 8 feet high.

The attack came at a time of high tension between the United States and Syria over the recent Israeli-Hezbollah war in neighboring Lebanon. In Damascus, the sentiment has become increasingly anti-American.

Syria has seen previous attacks by Islamic militants. In June, Syrian anti-terrorism police fought Islamic militants near the Defense Ministry in a gun battle that killed five people and wounded four. In 2004, four people were killed in a clash between police and a team of suspected bombers targeting the Canadian Embassy.

Pools of blood lay on the sidewalk outside the U.S. Embassy, near a burned car apparently used by the attackers. A sport utility vehicle with U.S. diplomatic tags had a bullet hole in its windshield, and the windows of nearby guard houses also were shattered.

There were conflicting reports of what happened.

Syrian TV said one car was rigged with explosives but never was detonated by the attackers. But one witness said a second car did explode, and TV video showed a burned car.

The Interior Ministry, which is in charge of police, said a fourth attacker now in detention was wounded in what it called a "terrorist attack." The report, carried on state-run television, said anti-terror units brought "the situation under control" and an investigation was under way.

In Washington, a State Department spokesman confirmed the attack by "unknown assailants" but had few details. "Local authorities have responded and are on the scene," said spokesman Kurtis Cooper said.

A U.S. Embassy statement said the embassy came under armed attack at 10:10 a.m. and that all embassy personnel were safe. One Syrian guard was injured by gunfire and was hospitalized in a stable condition, the statement said.

The embassy's charge d'affaires, Michael Corbin, met with Interior Minister Bassam Abdel Maguid at the scene, and spoke by phone with assistant minister of foreign affairs, Ahmed Arnous, according to the statement.

It said the Syrian government has pledged full security cooperation.

About 30 Syrian guards usually are posted around the embassy 24 hours a day, Moustapha said.

State television said four armed attackers "attempted to storm" the embassy, using automatic rifles and hand grenades. Syrian security guards attacked the gunmen, killing three and wounding a fourth, TV said.

The attackers came in two cars and parked one that was rigged with explosives in front of the embassy but did not blow it up, state-run TV reported. Explosives experts dismantled the bomb, it said.

But a witness told The Associated Press that two gunmen drove up in front of the embassy, got out of their car, shot at the Syrian sentries at the building's entrance, and then detonated explosives in the car.

The witness, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter, said the security personnel fired back, and security forces rushed to the scene.

Television showed a delivery van loaded with pipe bombs strapped to large propane gas canisters outside the embassy. Had the bombs detonated, the explosions could have caused massive damage.

The video also showed the charred remains of a smaller car parked several feet behind the van.

Up to 40 U.S. diplomats are posted at the embassy, which is "average" in size, according to Tom Case, a deputy spokesman at the State Department.

But Washington recalled Ambassador Margaret Scobey after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, amid suspicions that Damascus had a role in it. She has not returned since, effectively downgrading U.S. diplomatic representation to the level of charge d'affaires.

© 2009 CBS Interactive Inc. All Rights Reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed. The Associated Press contributed to this report.