

Afghan intelligence scuttles plot to assassinate U.S. ambassador

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KABUL (AP) - Afghan intelligence agents scuttled a plot to assassinate outspoken U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, swooping down on a station wagon carrying three Pakistanis armed with Kalashnikovs and rocket-propelled grenades, officials said Monday.

The arrests came days after President Hamid Karzai and U.S. officials warned that foreign fighters were slipping into Afghanistan to cause mayhem ahead of parliamentary elections.

Click to enlarge In this image broadcasted by Afghan TV station Tolo TV shows three arrested Pakistanis that plotted to assassinate U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad Sunday in Laghman province, 100 kms east of Kabul, Monday, June 20, 2005. The Pakistanis were arrested armed with rocket propelled grenades and assault rifles, just 50 meters from where Khalilzad had planned to inaugurate a road along with Afghanistan's interior minister. From left to right, Noorl Alam, from Peshawar, Zahid, from Sawabi and Murad Khan, from Peshawar. (

The men, armed with rocket-propelled grenades and assault rifles, were arrested Sunday in the Qarghayi district of northeastern Laghman province, just 45 metres from where Khalilzad had planned to inaugurate a road with Afghanistan's interior minister, two senior Afghan officials said.

The officials said agents were lying in wait after intelligence forces were tipped off about the plot in advance. Khalilzad, who is to be the next U.S. ambassador in Iraq, cancelled his appearance at the road opening at the last minute and was never in danger. The interior minister, Ali Ahmad Jalali, also cancelled his appearance.

Presidential spokesman Jawed Ludin confirmed the arrests, and Deputy National Security Director Abdullah told privately owned Tolo TV that the men were all between the ages of 19 and 23.

Afghan television broadcast a video of the suspects in custody - all wearing traditional shalwar khomeez and sporting thin moustaches - sitting on a brown sofa and being questioned by a man off camera. They identified themselves as Murat Khan, Noor Alam and Zahid and said they were from Pakistan.

None confessed on camera or was asked any questions about the planned attack.

But the two senior officials said the men had admitted their guilt to intelligence agents and told authorities they were in

Afghanistan "to fight jihad," or holy war.

The officials, both of whom have intimate knowledge of the investigation, spoke on condition of anonymity because of the extreme sensitivity of the intelligence and their positions within the government.

"Their aim was to assassinate Khalilzad, and they came to Afghanistan specifically for this operation," said one of the officials.

A State Department official, who declined to be identified because he is not authorized to speak for the department, confirmed that the assassination attempt had been thwarted but gave no details.

He said several plots against Khalilzad, Karzai and other senior officials had been foiled, but didn't elaborate.

Khalilzad, 54, became America's top diplomat in Afghanistan in November 2003 after serving as Washington's special representative here. Born in Afghanistan, he studied at the University of Chicago and has long been involved in crafting Washington's policy on the region.

Khalilzad has not shied away from offering his opinion about Afghan political players, earning a reputation as the true power behind the U.S.-backed Karzai. He has also repeatedly criticized Pakistan, prompting official protests from Islamabad.