

Taliban kill more than 20 in Kabul attacks

Financial Times, Feb. 12, 2009

By Demetri Sevastopulo and Daniel Dombey

Taliban extremists yesterday launched three attacks in Kabul that killed more than 20 people, underscoring the increasingly challenging environment as the US prepares to send more troops.

Barack Obama, US president, is expected to follow through on his campaign promise and announce plans to deploy more US soldiers to war-torn Afghanistan. Wearing suicide bomb vests and wielding attack rifles, eight people stormed three government buildings to launch simultaneous attacks on the eve of the visit of Richard Holbrooke, the US special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"We are reminded today of the brutal tactics that extremists like the Taliban wish to employ... It hardens our resolve to get the next steps in Afghanistan right," said Robert Gibbs, White House press secretary. General David McKiernan, the US commander in the country, has requested about 30,000 more troops.

Robert Gates, US defence secretary, has already said an initial three brigades, roughly 12,000 troops, could be deployed by the end of the summer if Mr Obama approved the move. Senior officials have played down expectations for what the US can achieve. Mr Gates has told Congress the US would "lose" in Afghanistan if the goal was to create "some sort of Central Asian Valhalla".

The White House is also awaiting the results of a three-month assessment by General David Petraeus, the head of US Central Command. That report, and another by the joint chiefs of staff, is expected to recommend that the US focus more on al-Qaeda militants, particularly those inside Pakistan.

Pakistan also saw an attack yester-

day with at least one person killed in a bomb attack in Peshawar. It came during a visit by Mr Holbrooke, as part of a trip to the border regions at the heart of US concerns.

Hillary Clinton, secretary of state, has asked Mr Holbrooke to "co-ordinate across the entire government in an effort to achieve US strategic goals" in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The White House said this week Bruce Riedel, a former CIA official, will head a review of policy towards the two countries. It is expected to be concluded before a Nato summit on April 3-4.