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MIDDLE EAST NEWS | Updated September 13, 2012, 9:54 a.m. ET

Libya Attack Sparks Crisis

U.S. Sends Marines After Ambassador, Three Other Americans Killed; 'We Couldn't Stop Them'

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By MARGARET COKER, ADAM ENTOUS and JULIAN E. BARNES



The U.S. Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, was killed when suspected Libyan religious extremists stormed the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi late Tuesday night, according to Libyan Deputy Prime Minister Mustafa Abushagour. Margaret Coker has the latest on The News Hub. Photo: AP.

The killing of the U.S. ambassador to Libya and three other Americans, in one of the most brazen attacks on a U.S. diplomatic compound in a generation, sparked a security crisis in the North African country, elevated tensions across the Middle East and raised concerns about how well the U.S. can protect its diplomats abroad.

Obama Comments on Attack on U.S. Embassy in Libya



President Barack Obama speaks in the White House Rose Garden on the death of the U.S. Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens.

Clinton Makes Statement on Envoy's Death

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U.S. Ambassador to Libya Killed in Benghazi

The U.S. responded to the assault by dispatching two Navy destroyers, dozens of Marines, federal investigators and intelligence assets to Libya to protect Americans and help hunt the suspected religious extremists who carried out the attack late Tuesday. U.S. officials described the attack that killed Ambassador Christopher Stevens as complex and possibly premeditated.

The assault in the Libyan city of Benghazi, along with a protest at the American embassy in Cairo, fueled a harsh exchange between President Barack Obama and Republican Mitt Romney.

Mr. Obama said the U.S. will work with Libya to bring the attackers to justice. He and other officials didn't rule out a U.S. strike. "Make no mistake, justice will be done," the president said.

The assault took place on the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, a day when security officials are typically on heightened alert. American officials, who



Violence spread throughout the night in the Middle East as protesters stormed the U.S. Embassy in San'a, Yemen. Julian Barnes and Matt Bradley have details on The News Hub. Photo: AP.

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What's the likely fallout from the killing of the U.S. ambassador to Libya as well as the storming of U.S. embassies in Libya and Egypt? Eurasia Group Middle East and North Africa Analyst Hani Sabra discusses on The News Hub. Photo: Reuters.

As attacks increased and flames in the consulate grew, personnel were forced to abandon the consulate building without the ambassador. American officials retrieved his body when it was brought to the airport the next day by Libyans.

Audio

Margaret Coker gives an update on The Wall Street Journal This Morning.

00:00 |
00:00

U.S. officials were still piecing together the day's events, which followed protests at the U.S. embassy in Cairo over an anti-Islamic video. In contrast to the Cairo protest, which appeared to be spontaneous, U.S. officials said the attack in Benghazi late Tuesday might have been planned by militants who used the protests as cover.

Photos

See photos of the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya.



U.S. envoy Christopher Stevens.

Timeline: Past Attacks

See a timeline of past attacks on U.S. embassies and consulates around the world.



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debriefed survivors, described a horrifying scene in the consulate where, amid thick smoke and gunfire, Mr. Stevens became separated from his security officer.

When the armed men arrived in the consulate neighborhood, "we couldn't stop them," said Saleheddine al-Arghoubi, a nearby resident. "They were multiplying, minute by minute. There were hundreds of them."

As attacks increased and flames in the consulate grew, personnel were forced to abandon the consulate building without the ambassador. American officials retrieved his body when it was brought to the airport the next day by Libyans.

An Obama administration official declined to detail the ambassador's security measures but said a review conducted ahead of the 9/11 anniversary found "no information and there were no threat streams to indicate that we were insufficiently postured."

American intelligence agencies were poring over information that could help indicate what groups may have taken part. Officials said the agencies are looking specifically at the pro-al Qaeda group Ansar al Sharia but cautioned they didn't have solid evidence.

Nearly 24 hours after the start of the shooting, officials struggled to explain what transpired through hours of chaos and terror inside the darkened consulate and a nearby annex. They warned that their preliminary version of events could change as more information became available.

The gang first arrived in the neighborhood around 8 p.m. local time carrying weapons including rocket-propelled grenade launchers and automatic rifles, said Ali Ben Saud, owner of the villa leased to the U.S. for the consulate.

A Libyan doctor said he and several neighbors tried to get the gang, which he estimated at 200, to leave as they marched toward the U.S. compound. "We told them to leave our homes alone and one [of the militants] replied, 'The Americans are infidels and we are going to finish them,' " the doctor said. "Many of us then fled because the shooting started."

Said Mr. al-Arghoubi, the neighborhood resident: "They didn't come to talk. They came to fight." The first shots were fired at around 10 p.m. local time, or 4 p.m. Eastern time, according to a preliminary U.S. account.

The attackers quickly gained access to the compound and began firing into the main building, setting it afire. A senior administration official said three people were inside the compound at the time: Mr.

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Stevens; Sean Smith, a foreign service information-management officer; and a U.S. regional security officer.

As the three tried to leave the burning building, they became separated from each other in heavy smoke. The regional security officer, whose name hadn't been disclosed by late Wednesday, made it outside, and then he and other security personnel rushed back into the burning building to try to rescue Mr. Stevens and Mr. Smith. They found Mr. Smith, already dead.

They were unable to find the ambassador before being forced to flee the building because of the heavy flames and continuing small-arms fire.

Mr. Obama was told Tuesday night that Mr. Stevens was unaccounted for.

At around midnight, the mission annex came under fire. Two U.S. diplomats were killed during that attack and two others were wounded.



Mohamed al-Magariaf, President of the Libyan General Congress, confirmed at a news conference that the U.S. ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, and three American members of his staff had been killed in an attack on the U.S. consulate in the eastern city of Benghazi. (Video: AP)

According to Mr. Ben Saud, the landowner, Libyan security guards jumped into the compound and pulled Mr. Stevens from the burning and smoke-filled building at around 1 a.m. local time. Libyans then drove him to Benghazi Central Hospital, where the staff tried unsuccessfully to revive him.

At about 2:30 a.m. local time, Libyan security forces regained control of the situation, according to the preliminary U.S. account.



A man walks in the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, that was attacked.

Obama administration officials said they didn't know what condition the ambassador was in when he left the compound. "His body was later returned to U.S. personnel at the Benghazi airport," an administration official said. A chartered aircraft evacuated U.S. personnel back to Tripoli, including the remains of those killed.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the attack should "shock the conscience" of people of all faiths, but wouldn't alter U.S.

policy in Libya. The "mission in Libya is noble and necessary...and will continue," she said from Washington. The U.S. also announced increased security measures for all U.S. diplomatic facilities.

Libyan officials, many of whom led the rebel government based in Benghazi and worked with Mr. Stevens during that time, condemned the killings. The head of the new congress, Mohammed Magarief, apologized to the American public for the tragedy.

By late Wednesday, no one had been arrested. Officials in Tripoli were scrambling to implement a response to what they admitted was a monumental security breach.



Egyptian protesters climbed the walls of the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and replaced the flag with a black standard bearing an Islamic inscription, in protest of a film deemed offensive to the Prophet Muhammad. Matt Bradley has details on The News Hub.

The U.S. sent the destroyers U.S.S. Laboon and U.S.S. McFaul to the Libyan coast to aid in any evacuations or humanitarian missions, said a U.S. official.

A U.S. Marine team was sent to supplement security at the U.S. embassy in Tripoli, arriving there Wednesday. The unit is known as a Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team, or FAST team. These typically number 50 Marines.

Mr. Stevens is the first ambassador killed by hostile forces since 1979, when the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan was murdered in Kabul.

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Members of Ansar al Sharia gave an interview to the local television station from the hospital early Wednesday morning, praising the men who attacked the consulate and calling them "the top layer of Libyan society." However, the members told Benghazi TV that their organization, a group of religious fighters who fought to help oust Moammar Gadhafi from power, didn't plan the attack against the Americans.

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Mr. Stevens, who was 52 years old, was usually based in Tripoli. He apparently was visiting Benghazi ahead of the planned opening of a U.S. cultural center there, said a Libyan official.

The attack on the U.S. consulate was the second this year. In June, suspected Islamic militants detonated an improvised explosive device at the same compound. A Libyan guard was injured, but no Americans were harmed. In the spring, the International Committee for the Red Cross offices in Benghazi were also targeted.

Washington has long been leery of the radical Islamic fringe in Libya. The largest numbers of foreign fighters in Iraq waging battles against U.S. soldiers were from two towns in eastern Libya, and U.S. drones have monitored those locations since the Libyan uprising last year.

—Siobhan Gorman, Devlin Barrett and Carol E. Lee contributed to this article.

Write to Margaret Coker at margaret.coker@wsj.com

A version of this article appeared September 13, 2012, on page A1 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Libya Attack Sparks Crisis.

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