

# **Exhibit 15**

## NewsRoom

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Section: A

### Taliban vows to protect suspect in U.S. embassy blasts 'at any cost'

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan - Afghanistan's hard-line Taliban militia pledged to protect suspected terrorist Osama bin Laden "at any cost," saying there was no evidence the millionaire was behind the U.S. embassy bombings in Africa.

Bin Laden was indicted Wednesday by a U.S. District Court in the Aug. 7 bombings, and is accused of conspiring to kill Americans outside the United States. The State Department also announced a reward of up to \$5 million for bin Laden's capture.

A spokesman for the Taliban religious army, which rules 90 percent of Afghanistan and has imposed a strict version of Islamic law, said the group would protect the Saudi dissident, who is living in the country.

"The United States is hostile to Osama and it is wrong for them to do anything without any proof and they have no case against Osama," said Abdul Hai Muttman, who was reached by satellite telephone in the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan.

"We cannot allow any harm to come to Osama because he is a Muslim and a guest," Muttman said.

Washington blames bin Laden's group, al Qaeda, for the bombings of U.S. embassies in East Africa that killed 224 people, including 12 Americans, and injured an estimated 5,000 people.

The United States retaliated Aug. 20, firing Tomahawk cruise missiles at suspected bin Laden training camps in eastern Afghanistan. At least 26 people were killed, but damage to the area was not considered extensive.

The Taliban say bin Laden will not be extradited. However, they have set up a judicial inquiry to accept evidence of bin Laden's involvement in terrorist activity and have promised to prosecute him if the evidence warrants it.

In Pakistan, an Islamic militant group threatened Thursday to retaliate if bin Laden is arrested, and described him as a "hero" to Muslims worldwide.

"It is a challenge to the entire Muslim world. . . . bin Laden is a hero of the Muslim world," said Omar Warsi, a leader of Pakistan's militant Sunni Muslim group, Sipah-e-Sahaba, or Guardians of the Friends of the Prophet. "If anything happens to him, America will be responsible."

Many Sipah-e-Sahaba followers are fighting in neighboring Afghanistan alongside the Taliban.

The U.S. Embassy in Pakistan evacuated nonessential staff and family members before the August bombing of Afghanistan, fearing retaliation. While some embassy workers are back, their dependents and about 30 percent of the staff have not been allowed to return.

Embassy officials said no fresh security warnings followed Wednesday's indictment. Security measures already in place include concrete barricades blocking the road leading to the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad and razor-sharp barbed wire topping the brick-walled compound.

In a separate development, a United Nations report released Thursday charged that Afghanistan's Sunni Muslim Taliban murdered as many as 4,000 civilians last August during a military campaign aimed partly at wiping out the country's Shiite Muslim minority.

The killings began on Aug. 8, as the Taliban's army marched into the northern Afghan stronghold of Mazar-I-Sharif. The report, prepared by the UN human rights watchdog for Afghanistan, charged the Taliban with targeting the city's ethnic Hazara residents, who are Shiite Muslims, during a "killing frenzy" that lasted for two weeks. As many as 3,000 Hazaras were executed in the first week alone.

Some observers view the killings as retaliation for the May 1997 murders of some 2,000 to 3,000 Taliban troops in Mazar-I-Sharif. Taliban forces, who entered the city under an agreement with a local armed faction, later came under attack by another faction, Hezb-I-Wahadat, the army of the ethnic Hazara community. Taliban soldiers who survived the fighting were executed in captivity.

--- **Index References** ---

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