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U.S. Airstrikes Hit Taliban After Attack on an Afghan Army Post

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American airstrikes hit Taliban positions in an embattled district of Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan on Tuesday after the militants tunneled under an army post and set off explosives, causing heavy casualties, Afghan officials said.

The toll from the explosions that rocked army posts in the town center of the Sangin district, which has been the scene of intense fighting for two days, was not immediately clear. Afghan officials said 10 to more than 20 soldiers had been killed, with many others unaccounted for. A Defense Ministry official, however, played down those numbers.

Brig. Gen. Charles H. Cleveland, a spokesman for American forces in Afghanistan, said the United States military had carried out approximately 10 airstrikes in and around the town of Sangin, where Helmand's main market and seat of government are, in the past 24 hours. "We are continuing to focus closely on Sangin, and Helmand at large, to help our Afghan partners," General Cleveland said.

Shakil Ahmad, a spokesman for the Afghan Army's 215 Maiwand Corps in Helmand, put the toll at 10 killed and six wounded. Other officials said the number of deaths was at least twice that.

However, Mohammad Radmanish, the deputy spokesman for the Defense Ministry, denied the reports of high casualties and played down concerns that Sangin was on the verge of falling. Mr. Radmanish said the Taliban had planted explosives under the main market in Sangin, “but the market is under our control.”

The fighting in Helmand, where the government has lost control of most territory beyond the provincial capital, has Afghan leaders scrambling to prevent the fall of the district. Reinforcements were sent to the scene of the battle on Tuesday, and the government’s chief executive, Abdullah Abdullah, flew into the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, along with senior security officials for emergency meetings.

Provincial council members say that of the 14 districts in Helmand, Afghanistan’s largest province in terms of territory and poppy cultivation, the government fully controls only two. Six districts are contested, and six others are largely controlled by the Taliban.

With the Taliban at the gates of Lashkar Gah, the fear that another major provincial capital will fall has led the NATO mission in Afghanistan to take a greater advisory role there. The United States has announced that about 300 Marines will take over that role in the spring, more than two years after the Marines left the province following years of bloody fighting.

During a meeting on Tuesday in Lashkar Gah that lasted more than six hours and was attended by senior NATO generals, Mr. Abdullah and his team tried to assess the vulnerabilities in the province and the steps that needed to be taken to recapture some of the lost territory before the spring fighting season.

“The police in Helmand are not in good condition,” said Javid Faisal, a spokesman for Mr. Abdullah, adding that the police force and the army needed to be strengthened.

Haji Mirajan, a member of the Sangin district council, said that little territory in the district remained under government control, and that Afghan forces were fighting to keep control of a few army posts and the district governor’s building.

Mr. Mirajan said the fact that the Taliban could tunnel right under an army base and set off explosives showed how limited the movement of Afghan forces had become in the district center. “The Taliban dug a long tunnel from the lower end of the bazaar, which they are controlling, to the clinic where army soldiers were and blew it up with explosives,” he said.