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Al Jazeera

British troops 'killed' in Afghan blast

Six soldiers "believed dead" after vehicle was caught by explosion while on patrol in southern province of Helmand.

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Six British soldiers are believed killed by an explosion in southern Afghan province of Helmand, according to the UK's defence ministry, in the deadliest attack on British forces in over five years.

A separate explosion in a crowded market in neighbouring Kandahar province killed four civilians and wounded nine others, provincial officials said.

The six British soldiers were on patrol in Helmand's Gereshk district on Tuesday when their armoured vehicle was caught by the blast, the ministry said in a statement on Wednesday.

Al Jazeera's Bernard Smith, reporting from the capital Kabul, said the soldiers were out of their armoured vehicle and had gone just about 500m outside the base when there was an enormous explosion.

Mohammad Ismail Hotak, a senior Afghan police official in Helmand, said the explosion was caused by a roadside bomb.

However, our correspondent said there was confusion about the cause of the blast.

"We're not sure if this was a road side bomb or something else," said Smith.

Our correspondent said that the Afghan authorities he had spoken to suggested that because the explosion took place so close to the base, which is monitored by close circuit television cameras, it would have been very difficult for anyone to plant a homemade bomb.

Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Mackenzie, a British army spokesman in Helmand, said the soldiers were "missing, believed killed", but said details of the incident were still being confirmed.

David Cameron, the British prime minister, told the British broadcaster BBC: "This is a desperately sad day for our country and desperately sad, of course, for the families concerned."

Increase in fatalities

Foreign combat troops are due to leave Afghanistan at the end of 2014, but doubts persist about the ability of Afghan soldiers and police to control the country.

Most of the UK's 9,500 soldiers currently serving with the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) are based in Helmand.

If the soldiers are confirmed dead, it would take the total number of British forces personnel who have died while serving in Afghanistan to more than 400 since the US-led invasion to topple the Taliban in October 2001.

The incident would also be the deadliest attack on British troops since 2006.

So far this year, 54 NATO troops have been killed in Afghanistan, including 38 from the United States and four from Britain.