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The New York Times

Taliban Kill 5 Afghan Education Officials Near Border

By GRAHAM BOWLEY

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Taliban insurgents ambushed a convoy of Afghan education officials traveling in a southeastern province close to the border with Pakistan on Tuesday, killing five officials and wounding three others, the police and the provincial governor's spokesman said.

The officials were part of a delegation visiting schools in Urgan, one of the largest districts in Paktika Province, and were making the 40-mile return journey to the provincial capital when their convoy was hit by a remote-controlled bomb on a mountainous section of the road. They then came under small-arms fire for 15 minutes before the attackers escaped.

The head of the province's education department, Atta Mohammed Qani, was part of the delegation and was wounded, said Abdul Wahid Kandahari, the police chief of Urgan District.

He said there had been intelligence that the delegation was under threat, but the officials had disregarded the warning. "They said, 'We are education department staff, and the Taliban have nothing to do with us,' and then they left on their own decision," he said.

Paktika was the scene of other violence on Sunday when four attackers wearing suicide vests occupied a business center in the provincial capital, Sharana, bombarding government buildings,

including the governor's house and offices of the National Directorate of Security, the Afghan intelligence agency. The Taliban claimed responsibility.

Although the Taliban now say they support education for Afghans, they have in the past shut down schools, and still periodically attack schools and education officials.

In neighboring Ghazni Province, less than a hundred miles from the Afghan capital, Kabul, the Taliban have forced the closing of all schools in 14 of 17 districts, including the provincial capital for the past two weeks, according to Mehraban, the spokesman for the provincial education department, who uses only one name.

The schools closed include one of the biggest one for girls in the province, Jahan Maliki High School, which has more than a thousand students and is in the center of the city about 100 yards from the provincial education department.

At a boys' school, also in the provincial capital, that had defied the Taliban's threat and remained open, attackers in the past week opened fire and wounded three students.

Ghazni is a divided province, with a few districts dominated by people of the Hazari ethnic minority. But most are dominated by Pashtuns, and it is in these districts that the Taliban hold most sway.

In the last parliamentary elections, instability meant that few Pashtuns cast votes, and as a result, only Hazari representatives were elected from Ghazni.

Mehraban said the Taliban's action on schools in the province was in response to a ban by the provincial government of motorcycles after they had been used by insurgents in a string of targeted assassinations against government and other officials.

NATO confirmed that schools in Ghazni had been closed because of Taliban intimidation, citing media reports of about 50 schools to have shut down.

"We have seen the media reports, and of course we are concerned. However, we are confident that Afghan authorities are capable of addressing these reports and know that we are prepared to support if requested," the NATO statement said.