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<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/08/afghanistan-police-killed-us-friendly-fire-airstrike>

Afghanistan officials say 11 police killed by US 'friendly fire' airstrike

- Undercover anti-narcotics police officers killed in Helmand province
- US to investigate possible worst international friendly fire incident

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Afghan police deploy near the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan. Eleven of their colleagues are reported killed by friendly fire on Sunday. Photograph: Massoud Hossaini/AP

American officials are investigating an airstrike in southern Afghanistan, after local officials said 11 Afghan police officers were killed. If confirmed, the incident is the deadliest recorded incident of friendly fire involving international troops since the war began.

The allegations come from Afghan officials who claim a US airstrike on Sunday killed a group of counter-narcotics police officers on patrol in Garmsir district in the volatile Helmand province.

A US military spokesman, Colonel Brian Tribus, denied that Nato or US forces had conducted any strikes in Helmand on 6 September, but said they had launched an air raid that day in Maiwand district of neighbouring Kandahar province.

However, the area where Afghan officials claim the attack took place is a sparsely populated desert area called Rigestan, or Dasht-e Rigi, a barren plateau without clear borders that stretches across Helmand and Kandahar.

While Tribus told news agencies that the strike in Kandahar had been conducted “to eliminate threats to the force”, Afghan officials said the police officers, though posing as Taliban fighters who are known to be involved in drug smuggling, were not threatening any international forces.

“They were trying to make an ambush to catch drug smugglers,” said Omar Zawak, spokesman for Helmand’s governor. Zawak refused to blame anyone for the attack, but confirmed that it had been an airstrike. The US is the only member of the Nato coalition known to have carried out bombing raids in Afghanistan this year.

“Based on information we received today, we feel it is prudent to investigate the airstrike our forces conducted in Kandahar on 6 September,” said Brigadier General Wilson Shoffner, deputy chief of staff for communications. “We will complete the investigation in close coordination with our Afghan partners and in a transparent, timely and thorough manner. We will release further details regarding this incident as they become available.”

It is not the first time this year that American troops are accused of accidentally killing their Afghan partners. In July, a US helicopter airstrike killed eight Afghan soldiers and wounded five others in Logar, apparently mistaking them for opposition fighters. The US apologised for that incident, which at that point was the deadliest event of friendly fire involving foreign forces since 2001. If US responsibility is confirmed, Sunday’s incident will have been even deadlier.

The US military has ramped up airstrikes in Afghanistan over the summer. Most recently, they conducted 17 airstrikes in Helmand as Afghan security forces wrested control back from the Taliban of the embattled Musa Qala district.

Garmsir is far from that part of Helmand, which international forces usually consider the hotbed of the insurgency. However, it is part of a route that sustains Afghanistan’s vast drug smuggling economy and helps finance the insurgency.