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<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-idUSKCN0XB19S>

Taliban kill top police official in Afghanistan ambush

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Taliban insurgents ambushed and killed a police commander and seven other people, including three women, in Afghanistan on Thursday, two days after the insurgents announced the beginning of their spring offensive.

The Taliban insurgency has gained strength since the withdrawal of international forces from combat at the end of 2014 and the Taliban are stronger than at any point since they were driven from power by U.S.-backed forces in 2001.

Qahar Khurm Aabi, highway police commander in the northern provinces of Takhar and Kunduz, was killed in a Taliban ambush along with four of his guards on his way to work, said Khalil Aseer, Takhar police spokesman.

The three women killed were passers-by, he said.

There was no immediate comment from the Taliban.

The militants, fighting to drive Afghanistan's Western-backed government from power, said on Tuesday they had launched "Operation Omari", named after the late Taliban founder Mullah Mohammad Omar, aimed at defeating the government and establishing their version of an Islamic state.

The seasons have long shaped violence in Afghanistan with fighting easing off in the winter, when mountain passes get snowed in, and picking up again in the spring and summer.

About 5,500 members of the Afghan security forces were killed last year and more than 14,000 were wounded.

Underscoring the daunting task Afghanistan faces in establishing peace, a militia commander and a member of a provincial council were killed by rivals in Takhar on Wednesday after a long-running feud, Aseer said.