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The Global and Mail

NATO air strike kills 2 Afghan civilians

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A NATO helicopter gunship inadvertently killed two civilians while attacking suspected insurgents in the northern province of Khost, NATO announced Thursday.

The attack targeted a Haqqani network leader in Tere Zayi district on Wednesday, according to NATO.

“At the time of the strike, two civilians were walking near the moving targeted vehicle,” NATO said Thursday. “They were previously unseen by coalition forces prior to the initiation of the air strike. Unfortunately both were killed as an unintended result of the strike.”

Khost provincial police chief Abdul Hakim Ishaqzai said at least one of the civilians was a child.

NATO's initial description of the attack on Wednesday said a “precision air strike” killed the Haqqani leader and two other insurgents while they were driving in a vehicle. That announcement also described how NATO troops nearly missed civilians near the site of the attack.

“Just prior to the weapon impact, an unassociated civilian vehicle and two pedestrians walking in a wadi appeared, next to the target vehicle,” NATO said.

Afghan forces determined that the occupants of the vehicle were unharmed, NATO said.

Accidental deaths of civilians due to coalition military operations in Afghanistan are a major source of tensions between Afghans and NATO. U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates personally apologized to Afghan President Hamid Karzai after NATO troops in a helicopter gunship misidentified nine children gathering firewood for insurgents and killed them. The killing sparked protests throughout the country and calls for the international force to cease air strikes and night raids.

At least 2,777 civilians were killed in Afghanistan in 2010, a 15 per cent increase over the prior year, according to a recent United Nations report. The insurgency was blamed for most of those deaths, and while civilian deaths attributed to NATO troops declined 21 per cent in 2010, Afghan leaders say the number remains too high.

NATO also said two of its troops were killed by an improvised bomb in southern Afghanistan. NATO provided no additional details about the attack.

International forces have been fighting pitched battles for control of the southern part of the country, which is a key Taliban stronghold.

The latest deaths bring to 23 the number of coalition service members who have died in Afghanistan so far this month.