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Reuters

Taliban militants abduct 50 policemen in Afghanistan

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Taliban insurgents abducted around 50 off-duty Afghan policemen in an ambush in a volatile province in northeastern Afghanistan, the militant group and provincial officials said on Sunday.

Taliban-led militants have stepped up their fight this year against the Afghan government and its Western backers at a time when Kabul has announced security responsibilities for seven areas will be handed to Afghan forces in July.

The policemen were abducted by militants in the Chapa Dara district of remote northeastern Kunar province after returning from neighboring Nuristan province where they had traveled to collect their salaries, Nuristan governor Jamaluddin Badr said.

"The policemen were in civilian clothes and had no weapons with them," Badr told Reuters from Nuristan.

Mohammad Farooq, a senior police officer in Nuristan, confirmed around 50 policemen had been kidnapped by insurgents.

In an email statement sent to media, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the Islamist group was holding 50 policemen and the group's military council for the area would decide their fate.

Kunar and Nuristan are remote and mountainous provinces that

share a porous border with lawless areas of neighboring Pakistan, where insurgents are said to have safe havens from which they launch attacks into Afghanistan.

The latest incident highlights some of the difficulties faced by U.S. and NATO forces as they begin to hand over security responsibility to Afghan troops, allowing foreign troops to withdraw gradually from an unpopular war now almost 10 years old.

The process announced this week is programed to end with the withdrawal of all foreign combat troops from the country by 2014.

The transition was agreed by NATO and U.S. leaders last year when the war had reached its bloodiest phase since the Taliban were overthrown by U.S.-led Afghan forces in late 2001, with record civilian and military casualties.

Afghanistan's police force has for years lagged behind the country's better-trained army. Poorly equipped police are often the only face of the government in remote areas, making them vulnerable to insurgent attacks.