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The Associated Press

## Car bombs rock Afghan city of Kandahar killing 6

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A suicide bomber targeting a compound shared by foreign companies set off a massive explosion late Thursday in the southern city of Kandahar, blowing out windows across the city and killing at least six people, the president's powerful half brother said.

The blast came hours after another car bomb exploded outside a Kandahar hotel and injured at least eight people.

Fighting in the north of the country, meanwhile, left four German soldiers dead, officials said, while insurgents carjacked U.N. vehicles elsewhere in northern Afghanistan.

The Thursday night explosion occurred when the suicide bomber managed to get his car past one barrier leading into a compound shared by a number of western companies, then set off the explosion at a second barrier, said Ahmed Wali Karzai, the half brother of Afghan President Hamid Karzai and an influential figure in the city. He said at least six people were killed, including three foreigners and three Afghan soldiers, and several more people had been injured, Ahmed Wali Karzai said. Authorities, including NATO forces and Afghan soldiers, police and intelligence officers, swarmed the scene soon after and sealed off the roads.

The blast blew out windows as far as 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) away. The compound includes the offices of the international contracting company Louis Berger Group, the Afghanistan Stabilization Initiative and the aid contracting company Chemonics International.

Kandahar, the largest city in the southern Taliban heartland, has been shaken repeatedly by attacks in recent weeks. On March 13, a suicide squad detonated bombs at a newly fortified prison, police headquarters and two other locations, killing at least 30 people.

The earlier explosion, in front of the Noor Jehan Hotel, shattered windows in the shabby four-story structure, destroyed five vehicles and damaged a number of shops in the area. At least two of those injured were in serious condition, said local official Nidah Mohammed.

The hotel, located in a busy downtown commercial district, is home to a number of foreign news organizations and has little security. International forces present in the city rarely patrol through the area. The news organizations are largely staffed by Afghans, and there was no immediate indication foreigners were among those hurt.

Aghalala, a money changer working the street in front of the hotel, said two men pulled up in the car, parked it, and walked away. Five minutes later the white sedan exploded, said Aghalala, who uses only one name.

Following the afternoon blast, U.S. and Afghan military convoys arrived, blocking off the street and jamming cell phone signals, apparently to prevent insurgents detonating any remote controlled bombs that might be in the area. Police set up roadblocks blocking traffic from in front of the hotel.

Kandahar is the main city of Afghanistan's volatile south, from which the hard-line Taliban Islamic militant movement emerged as a political and military force in the early 1990s. NATO forces are expected to launch a major operation in and around the city this summer in a bid to root out insurgents and turn around the nearly nine-year war. The Taliban has reasserted its presence in large parts of the country from which it had faded following the 2001 U.S. invasion that toppled its regime.

In a sign of how the insurgency has also spread to the once-stable north, four German soldiers were killed and five wounded in fighting Thursday in Baghlan province, according to the Defense Ministry in Berlin. It said fighting broke out after a German Eagle armored vehicle was struck by what was believed to be a rocket around noon (0730 GMT).

Afghan police earlier reported heavy fighting involving Afghan, German and other foreign forces against the Taliban in Baghlan that included airstrikes and heavy weaponry. Provincial police spokesman Habib Rahman said three Afghan policemen were also killed in the fighting.

German Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, who was due to end a visit to Afghanistan on Thursday, was extending his stay in the country, the ministry said.

It was the largest loss of life in a single day for the German contingent in Afghanistan since four soldiers were killed and 29 injured in June 2003 when their convoy was attacked en route to the airport in Kabul.

Earlier this month, three German soldiers died in a firefight in Kunduz province just north of Baghlan, fueling opposition at home to Germany's commitment of about 4,500 troops to the multinational NATO force.

The magazine Stern reported Wednesday that 62 percent of 1,004 Germans polled by the Forsa institute on April 8-9 said they support bringing the troops home. Stern said that is the highest percentage ever on that question. The poll's margin of error was given as plus or minus three percentage points.

Elsewhere in Baghlan, five Afghans working for the U.N. Office for Projects were traveling in two vehicles when they were held up by insurgents and the vehicles were taken.

"We're working with Afghan authorities to try to ascertain their current whereabouts," Dan McNorton, a spokesman for the U.N. mission in Afghanistan, said of the U.N. employees. There were no other details.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, meanwhile, reported that civilian injuries caused by roadside bombs and other explosives in southern Afghanistan have soared this year.

The Red Cross said a hospital it supports in Kandahar admitted up to 40 percent more patients wounded by bombs in the first two months of the year compared with the same period last year. It said in a report the wounded came from the surrounding province, also called Kandahar, as well as neighboring Helmand.

It said the Mirwais Hospital treated 51 patients for injuries caused by homemade bombs in March alone, well above the average monthly figure.

"Homemade bombs and improvised mines continue to pose a major threat to civilians in the south of Afghanistan. In the last few weeks, ICRC personnel at Mirwais Hospital in Kandahar have observed a substantial increase in casualties," the report said.

The insurgency employs roadside bombs and concealed homemade explosives to attack Afghan government forces and NATO troops and spread fear among the populace.

On Thursday, a scrap metal dealer and four children helping him were killed by a suspected homemade bomb as they loaded materials collected door-to-door in rural Kandahar onto a vehicle, provincial government spokesman Zulmai Ayubi said. Eight children were also wounded in the blast, which occurred near the town of Takhta Pul.