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## 29 Die In Fighting In North Afghanistan

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At least 29 militants, including two commanders, have been killed over four days of intense fighting aimed at protecting supply routes through northern Afghanistan, the Interior Ministry said Sunday.

Elsewhere, a foreign soldier was killed by a roadside bomb in southern Afghanistan on Saturday, NATO said, the third foreign death that day following an earlier announcement of the loss of two Dutch marines in the southern province of Uruzgan. The third soldier's nationality and other details of the incident were being withheld pending family notification, it said.

So far this month, 24 foreign soldiers have died in Afghanistan, where foreign troop levels are climbing toward 130,000 in a push to cripple the resurgent Taliban insurgency. An Afghan policeman was also killed during mine clearance operations in the southern province of Kandahar, the Interior Ministry said.

Afghan and international forces launched an offensive last week in the northern province of Baghlan to push the Taliban out of a number of districts, including the outskirts of the provincial capital, about 120 miles (190 kilometers) north of Kabul. Insurgents had stepped up attacks in the formerly calm province as part of efforts to disrupt a key northern overland supply route for international forces.

NATO air strikes bombarded insurgent positions, killing 29 and wounding 52, said Zemer Bashary, spokesman for the Interior Ministry, which oversees the Afghan police force.

At least three Afghan police and four German soldiers have been killed in the fighting. Bashary said the operation was continuing on Sunday.

Among the Taliban killed were two important commanders, Bashary said, without giving their names or other details. He said he had no information on deaths or injuries among civilians.

"The goal of the operation in Baghlan is to bring peace and stability where it was under the threat of the militants," Bashary said.

Bashary also said authorities were working to free five Afghan workers for the U.N. Office of Project Services who were taken hostage Thursday in Baghlan. The U.N. has said it is working with the Afghan Ministry of Interior to seek their release.

Also Sunday in the northern province of Faryab, one person was killed and 14 wounded when a remote-controlled bomb exploded in a busy market in the town of Dawlatabad, according to Ahmad Jawed Bedar, spokesman for the provincial governor. It wasn't clear who set the bomb or what its intended target was. While Faryab has been relatively quiet, it shares a border with volatile Baghdis province.

Joint Afghan and NATO patrols also discovered weapons and drug caches in Kandahar and neighboring Helmand province, including more than 2,000 pounds (900 kilograms) of raw opium, 1,875 pounds (851 kilograms) of processed opium, and 615 pounds (279 kilograms) of hashish. The occupants of the trucks were held and the drugs were to be destroyed, NATO said.

Afghanistan produces the raw material for 90 percent of the world's heroin, much of it drawn from the opium fields of Kandahar and Helmand. Profits from the drug trade fill the Taliban's coffers.

Violence in the north has proved an increasing distraction from NATO's main focus on Kandahar, the largest city in southern Afghanistan, where Afghan and international forces are conducting operations in preparation for a major push against the Taliban in the group's spiritual heartland.

The operation's aim is to reassert central government control in the region ahead of parliamentary elections in September.

Afghanistan's Western backers have insisted that the military offensive must be complemented by efforts to reform the flawed electoral system, in order to regain Afghans' trust in their leaders.

President Hamid Karzai on Saturday named a respected former judge to head the Independent Electoral Commission, an organizing body, and ended his bid to exclude international representatives from a separate independent fraud-monitoring group.

The moves meet long-standing international demands that the electoral process be cleaned up after massive fraud in last year's presidential balloting.