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Reuters

Afghan security forces battle Kandahar insurgents for second day

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Afghan troops clashed with the Taliban in the southern city of Kandahar for a second day on Sunday after insurgents launched coordinated attacks with rocket-propelled grenades and suicide raids against government buildings.

The death toll from gunbattles that continued through the night had risen to three, with 46 people wounded, including 24 policemen, border police General Razeq said. It was unclear how many insurgents had been killed.

Heavy machinegun fire and explosions could still be heard with fighting continuing in two areas of the city, as Afghan forces aided by NATO-led coalition troops mopped up remaining pockets of insurgent resistance.

Provincial governor Tooryalai Wesa, whose compound in the heart of the city was the first to come under attack on Saturday in a fusillade of rocket-propelled grenades, said insurgents were putting up heavy resistance.

In a television statement the day before, Wesa promised that the insurgents firing on his compound from a nearby shopping mall would be killed "one by one."

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the simultaneous attacks on Wesa's office, as well as Afghanistan's intelligence agency and police outposts, saying they were part of a spring offensive that began a week ago on May 1.

The insurgency said the attacks, which involved more than six suicide bombers and explosive-packed vehicles, were nothing to do with revenge for the killing of al Qaeda ally Osama bin Laden, despite claims otherwise by Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai.

Other attacks occurred in the neighboring Arghandab river valley to the west of the city, which is an important insurgent route for moving men and weapons into Kandahar city.

Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban, has been the focus of military operations over the past year. U.S. and NATO commanders have said they have made some security gains, but those successes are not yet entrenched.

Violence across Afghanistan last year reached its worst levels since the Taliban were overthrown in late 2001, with record casualties on all sides of the conflict.

The Taliban have managed to carry out a number of high-profile attacks inside Kandahar and in the capital Kabul over the past year despite Afghan and foreign forces beefing up security around both cities.

Last month, hundreds of prisoners, mostly insurgents, escaped from a jail in Kandahar through a tunnel dug by Taliban militants. A spokesman for Karzai described the escape as a "disaster" for the government.

A Taliban spokesman said escapees from that jailbreak were among hundreds of fighters involved in the attacks.

It was not possible to verify independently the number of militants who took part in the attacks, and the Taliban often exaggerate their claims.