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## Bomb kills 2 Americans in Afghanistan

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A bomb attack killed two U.S. service members in southern Afghanistan on Tuesday, while Afghan officials said at least 18 militants died in a recent operation in the same region.

A spokesman for U.S. forces, Col. Wayne Shanks, confirmed that the dead were Americans but declined to provide further details until family members were notified.

Thousands of U.S., NATO and Afghan forces have poured into southern Afghanistan in recent months to try to rout the Taliban from areas long ruled more by the militants than by the government of President Hamid Karzai.

U.S. Marines and Afghan troops mounted a massive operation in the southern town of Marjah this spring, and troops are increasing pressure in the southeastern province of Kandahar, the birthplace of the former Taliban regime.

With Mr. Karzai in Washington as part of a four-day U.S. visit, President Obama was holding a series of closed-door meetings on Afghanistan on Tuesday. He has greatly expanded the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan since taking office, but he plans to start drawing down troops in July 2011. The goal that is widely viewed as dependent on successful operations this summer.

Afghanistan's Interior Ministry said Tuesday that Afghan and NATO forces killed 18 militants and arrested six a day earlier in the Sangin district of southern Helmand province.

NATO spokesman Master Sgt. Jeff Loftin declined to comment because the military alliance was still investigating the incident.

In Kandahar, meanwhile, insurgents attacked a house and killed one civilian who had been targeted for dealing with Afghan government officials, provincial police Chief Fazel Ahmad Sherzad said. Citing eyewitness accounts, he said the man's relatives, including some women, returned fire and killed three Taliban.

Violence has been rising countrywide in recent months. In northern Kunduz province on Tuesday, about 50 students at a girls' school were hospitalized after losing consciousness or vomiting in what the top local health official called a suspected poison gas attack.

Regional public health chief Azizullah Safer said the mass sickening resembled several other suspected gas attacks last week at girls' schools in Kunduz and the Afghan capital, Kabul. Officials believe they have been carried out by militants opposed to education for girls.

Also Tuesday, four teachers and nine students were hospitalized after a bomb went off underneath a stairwell at a boys' school in the Smalhail district of eastern Khost province, said a student and regional health chief Amir Badsh.

Eleven militants were killed in operations in the east and south Monday, the Afghan Defense Ministry said.

NATO said the alliance killed "several insurgents" in Khost on Monday during an allied operation involving air support deployed during a search for an operative of the Haqqani group, an Afghan Taliban group based in Pakistan.