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Insurgents attack NATO's southern Afghan base

HEIDI VOGT

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Insurgents launched a ground attack against NATO's main military base in southern Afghanistan on Saturday, officials said.

Rockets started hitting Kandahar Air Field about 8 p.m. local time (15:30 GMT), followed quickly by a ground assault, said Navy Commander Amanda Peperseim, a spokeswoman for NATO forces at the base. She said the attack was still ongoing and did not provide further details.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack — the third major assault on NATO's military hubs in Afghanistan in six days. On Tuesday, a Taliban suicide bomber attacked a NATO convoy in the capital, killing 18 people including six NATO service members. Then on Wednesday, dozens of Taliban militants attacked the main U.S. military base — Bagram Air Field — killing an American contractor in fighting that lasted more than eight hours.

The attacks came soon after the Taliban announced a spring offensive against NATO forces and Afghan government troops — their response to a promise by the Obama administration to squeeze the Taliban out of their strongholds in southern Kandahar province.

Attacks in the south earlier Saturday killed three NATO service members and a civilian working with the military, NATO said in a statement. It did not provide further details.

A loudspeaker announcement at the Kandahar base said the ground attack was coming from the north, said Maura Axelrod, a reporter with HDNet who was inside the base. She said she could hear heavy outgoing fire and that commanders had come into the bunker where she had taken cover to order all Marines with weapons to help in establishing a security perimeter.

An Afghan named Najibullah who works with a private security company on the base said that he heard rockets hitting for about half an hour. He only gave one name.

Kandahar Air Field just outside Kandahar city is the launching pad for thousands of additional U.S. forces pouring into the country for a summer surge against the Taliban.

Also Saturday, at least a dozen people were killed south of the capital after U.S. troops spotted two insurgents trying to plant bombs, an Afghan official said.

The two were shot dead in Paktia province, district chief Gulab Shah said. Troops saw comrades drag the two bodies away and called in a helicopter gunship which killed 10 more people, whom U.S. officials said were all militants, Shah said.

Shah said Afghan authorities had launched an investigation to make sure the dead were all insurgents.

Civilian deaths are a flashpoint issue in Afghanistan, where President Hamid Karzai has urged NATO to take all necessary measures to protect civilian lives.