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The Associated Press

Militants attack Afghan police convoy, kill 5 officers with roadside bomb, official says

05/29/2010

Militants ambushed an Afghan police convoy with a roadside bomb and gunfire in eastern Afghanistan, killing five officers before fleeing NATO aerial bombardment, an official said Saturday.

Two militants were killed and up to six wounded in the battle Friday in Paktia province, said Ghulam Dastagir, the deputy provincial police chief.

He said the convoy was headed toward the Dandi Pathan district when one vehicle was hit by a roadside bomb blast, killing five officers and wounding the district police chief. Militants opened fire after the blast, triggering a gunbattle that lasted several hours before NATO aircraft were called in.

Farther north, officials in Nuristan province were still trying to confirm reports that a senior Pakistani Taliban leader was killed in several days of fighting between security forces and militants who have been trying to seize control of the Barg-e-Matal district on the Pakistan border.

Villagers who took part in the fighting said they had killed Taliban commander Maulana Fazlullah, who spearheaded the takeover of Pakistan's Swat Valley three years ago, gaining prominence as the "Radio Mullah" for his vehemently anti-Western sermons on local radio. The former mountain resort area fell under Taliban control until Pakistani forces drove them out last year.

Pakistani Taliban leaders say Fazlullah was in Nuristan but they believe he is still alive.

Meanwhile, NATO announced Friday that Afghan and international troops acting on intelligence information found and destroyed two bomb-making and weapons storage facilities this week in Kandahar province, and battled with militants who tried to defend them.

A cache found at one facility, in the Panjwai district, included high explosives, mortar rounds, roadside bombs, rocket-propelled grenades and automatic rifles, a NATO statement said. At the other, mines, roadside bombs and a stockpile of materials and equipment for making more were found. The exact location was not disclosed.

On Friday, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, and other dignitaries officially launched the construction of a rail link between northern Afghanistan and neighboring Uzbekistan. The 50-mile (75-kilometer) line from the Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif to Termez in Uzbekistan would eventually carry millions of tons of goods between the two countries, officials said.

Transport routes from Central Asia are among key supply lines for trade in Afghanistan — and for U.S. military operations. Taliban militants have sought to disrupt and control transport routes all over the country.