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## 8 Afghan civilians killed in fighting, bombing

By RAHIM FAIEZ

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KABUL, Afghanistan – A clash between Afghan forces and Taliban militants left four civilians dead in a southern district where a major NATO operation early this year was meant to reassert government control, a provincial official said Thursday.

Also, a roadside bombing in the same province killed four other civilians.

The clash happened early Wednesday after militants fired on an Afghan forces patrol in Marjah district, sparking a gunbattle, Helmand provincial spokesman Daoud Ahmadi said. The civilians — three men and one woman — were killed when a rocket hit a house, he said.

No security forces were hurt, Ahmadi added. It was not clear if there were any militant casualties.

Four other civilians — two men and two young boys — were killed when their motorbike hit a roadside bomb in Helmand's Nawzad district on Wednesday afternoon, he said.

Civilian casualties are a hot-button issue in Afghanistan. Although most are caused by militant action, those caused by Afghan and international security forces are believed to undercut support for the weak Afghan government and boost support for the insurgents.

A major operation launched in February by NATO forces was intended to wrest Marjah, a Taliban stronghold and a center of the lucrative opium trade, from insurgents. Despite subsequent efforts to win the support of residents with development projects and improved security, militants are believed to have melted back into the community where they still wield influence.

The U.S. Defense Department, meanwhile, confirmed the death of a U.S. soldier from militant gunfire in neighboring Kandahar province on Tuesday.

NATO is readying its next major operation in that province, the Taliban movement's birthplace — key to the Obama administration's strategy of turning around the nearly nine-year war.

NATO reported that Afghan and NATO forces killed several suspected insurgents and detained others for questioning in a two-day clearing operation of a Taliban hide-out in the province's Zhari district that ended Thursday morning.

In other violence, a roadside bombing hit an Afghan army truck in eastern Nangahar province on Wednesday, killing two soldiers and wounding two, said Ghafoor Khan, spokesman for the provincial police chief.

In Wardak province, which is adjacent to the capital Kabul, a joint operation of Afghan and international forces captured a district-level Taliban commander, Mullah Habibullah, said Shahidullah Shahid, spokesman for the provincial governor.

NATO described him as a Taliban facilitator who bought and distributed rockets, ammunition and bomb materials to insurgent networks.

Five militants were killed and eight others in addition to Habibullah were arrested in the operation in Sayed Abad district, Shahid said.

In southern Zabul province, NATO and Afghan forces killed five Taliban insurgents in an operation Wednesday, said Mohammad Jan Rasoolyar, a spokesman for the provincial government.

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