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Reuters

Afghan politician killed in usually stable area, officials say

By Qiamuddin Shams

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PARWAN - A leading politician from what is normally one of Afghanistan's most stable regions has been killed, officials said on Tuesday, another blow as NATO-led forces prepare to begin handing over security responsibility to Afghans next month.

The body of Jawad Zuhaak, the head of the provincial council in central Bamiyan province, was found in neighbouring Parwan province on Tuesday, a senior hospital official said.

Zuhaak and his bodyguard had been kidnapped in the Sia Gerd province of Parwan on Friday, police said.

Khwaja Mohammad, the head of the Parwan hospital, said Zuhaak had been shot in the face.

Bamiyan, which came under the world spotlight in 2001 when the Taliban destroyed two giant sandstone Buddhas, is one of seven areas where security responsibility will be transferred formally from foreign troops to Afghan control in the first phase of a gradual transition process due to begin next month.

The process will ultimately lead to the last foreign combat troops leaving Afghanistan by the end of 2014 under a plan agreed to between Afghan and NATO leaders at a summit in Lisbon last December.

Bamiyan and Panjshir, which have long been peaceful anti-Taliban strongholds, are the only provinces that will be handed over in their entirety in the first phase of transition. Both are already largely in Afghan hands.

Other areas include the cities of Herat in the west, Mazar-i-Sharif in the north and Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand in the south, long a Taliban stronghold and still one of the most violent provinces in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's intelligence agency has said the Taliban are trying to disrupt plans for the security transfer and there have been major attacks in Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif in recent weeks.

Violence has surged across Afghanistan since the Taliban began their spring offensive at the beginning of May, vowing to hit Afghan government and security forces as well as foreign targets.

U.S. commanders had already warned of a surge of attacks as the Taliban sought to hit back after NATO-led troops made significant gains against insurgents in the south over the past 18 months.

Big attacks in cities like Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif and in the east, where the insurgency is more fragmented, have shown the Taliban are attempting to demonstrate they can still hit important targets despite the security gains.

Some U.S. lawmakers and analysts fear it may be too early to begin withdrawing troops so soon after the gains were made and with violence again hitting record levels.

At least 57 foreign troops were killed in May, the bloodiest month of the year so far, and this year is on track to match 2010, when military and civilian casualties hit their highest levels since the Taliban were ousted in late 2001.

Since NATO-led forces began to hit back last year, the Taliban have adapted tactics and dramatically increased the number of targeted killings of senior Afghan military and government figures in an attempt to derail transition.

The killing of Zuhaak in Parwan would fit that pattern.

Abdul Haleem, the chief of Sia Gerd district in Parwan, said homemade bombs had been planted around Zuhaak's body, making it difficult for security forces to recover it.