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2 blasts rock S. Afghanistan in weekend violence

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KABUL, Afghanistan – Two bombs hidden in push carts exploded less than a half hour apart in one of Afghanistan's most dangerous provinces, underscoring the continued security threat despite years of trying to bring peace to the unstable south.

The double explosions in Helmand province Sunday were just two in a series of attacks reported over the weekend across the country.

They came a day after a U.N. report painted a grim picture of the security situation in Afghanistan, saying roadside bombings and assassinations have soared in the first four months of the year. In Washington, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said on "Fox News Sunday" while the war is a "tough pull," momentum was shifting toward the U.S. troops and their Afghan and international partners.

U.S. troops are hoping to gain the upper hand before President Barack Obama's July 2011 deadline to begin withdrawing American forces, now numbering more than 94,000. It's unclear how troops would leave, but Obama's chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, told ABC's "This Week" the July 2011 date is firm. Emanuel did not dispute quoted remarks from Vice President Joe Biden that "a whole lot" of troops would leave then.

The double bombing occurred early Sunday in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province. The first explosion in front of a bank killed a young girl and a woman and wounded at least 14 other people, the Afghan Ministry of Interior said.

"I was going to get my salary from Kabul bank and there was a blast," Afghan policeman Abdul Tawab said at the scene.

He was among Afghan security forces already at the first bombing site when they heard the second blast, which occurred in front of a high school about a mile and a half (3 kilometers) away.

Five people, including an Afghan soldier, were injured in the second explosion less than a half hour after the first, according to Daoud Ahmadi, a spokesman for the provincial governor.

He said a third person had died in one of the two explosions, but it was unclear which one.

"The bomb was placed in a fruit cart," said Gul Mohammad, who was injured by one of the explosions.

"We heard a big blast," Mohammad said as he sat on a hospital bed being treated for a foot injury. "Then I saw lots of wounded people everywhere."

Helmand province has been the scene of bitter fighting against the Taliban, who are deeply entrenched in the rural towns and villages of the opium-poppy farming region. This month members of the provincial council of Nimroz province, which borders Helmand to the west, fled to Kabul after the Taliban killed one of their members in an armed attack on the provincial capital.

The members asked for more security, saying Taliban fighters were fleeing to Nimroz from Helmand because of NATO military pressure.

North of Lashkar Gah on Saturday, two Afghan policemen were killed and five others wounded when their vehicle hit a roadside bomb in Gereshk district, the interior ministry said.

In western Afghanistan, three Taliban militants were killed and 33 others were wounded in a clash with police Sunday morning, according to Sarajuddin Najebi, a spokesman for the provincial governor of Badghis province. He said the fighting occurred after local residents complained that insurgents were demanding taxes from farmers as they harvested their crops. He said after a civilian was killed in the fighting, residents requested help from Afghan security forces who attacked and killed the militants.

However, Sarajuddin Khan, a tribal leader from the district, gave a different account. He said after a private dispute Saturday, one of the parties requested assistance from Afghan security forces, claiming they were under attack from Taliban insurgents. He claimed 16 people from the remote village, including four women and five children, were killed in the subsequent fighting involving Afghan security forces and another 59 were wounded and taken to a hospital.

Speaking at the hospital in neighboring Herat province, the tribal leader said the injured included 12 children and four women.

In the east, Afghan authorities reported civilian casualties in what NATO said was an attack late Friday and Saturday against the Haqqani network, an al-Qaida-linked wing of the Taliban, along the border between Khost and Paktia provinces in southeastern Afghanistan. NATO said the attack included precision missile strikes against "a large number of armed insurgents."

Shafiq Mujahid, head of the Khost provincial council, said at least six civilians — five children and one woman — were killed in the airstrike and 13 other civilians were wounded.

NATO said it was investigating reports of civilian deaths and would accept full responsibility if civilians were "unintentionally harmed."

Also in the east, rockets fired by militants over the weekend struck two homes, killing four civilians, the ministry said.

One rocket landed on a house in the Qarghay district of Laghman province, killing two women and injuring two other adults Saturday. Another rocket, apparently targeting an airport in the Behsud district of Nangarhar province, struck a house on Sunday, killing two children and injuring three men and a woman.

In fighting Saturday in a different part of Nangarhar, 10 militants were killed and eight others wounded in a 30-minute clash in Sherzad district, said Ahmad Zia Abdulzai, a spokesman for the provincial governor.