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Bloomberg

Five French Soldiers Killed in Taliban Ambush in Afghanistan

By Helene Fouquet and Eltaf Najafizada

07/13/2011

Five French soldiers in Afghanistan were killed and four wounded by a suicide bomber who triggered a bomb near a convoy east of Kabul, the capital.

An Afghan civilian also died and two were injured in the ambush in the town of Joybar in the Kapisa province, the French president's office said in an e-mailed statement today. Zabihullah Mujahed, a spokesman for the Taliban, claimed responsibility for the attack in a text message to reporters.

“A suicide bomber blew himself up amid a gathering of French and Afghan forces today in the Tagap district of Kapisa province, killing and wounding 27 soldiers including French troops,” Mujahed said.

The attack came a day after French President Nicolas Sarkozy's visit to Afghanistan, during which he said France will withdraw a quarter of its 4,000 soldiers there by the end of 2012. The troops that were targeted by the bomber were protecting a local council meeting, according to the statement.

Today's killings bring the death toll of French soldiers to 72 since they arrived in Afghanistan in late 2001. A soldier was also killed accidentally on July 11. French troops who operate in

Afghanistan will join a military parade tomorrow in Paris marking Bastille Day, which celebrates the beginning of the French Revolution.

“This did not happen in a combat situation, but as French troops were working on supporting Afghan power and transferring power,” said Jean-Vincent Brisset, a researcher on Afghanistan at the International and Strategic Relations Institute in Paris. “The Taliban are challenging this transfer of power,” he told BFM Television.

Heavy Toll

Today’s death toll is the highest for France in Afghanistan since an August 2008 attack in which 10 French soldiers were killed. That ambush occurred on a mountainous road about 40 kilometers (24 miles) east of Kabul during a fight with 100 Taliban insurgents that lasted for more than 12 hours. Additional details about today’s attack haven’t been disclosed.

France has the fourth-largest contingent in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s Afghan mission after Sarkozy doubled the number of troops following his 2007 election. French forces are mostly based east of Kabul to shield the capital from insurgents operating along the Pakistani border.

The French government announced plans to start pulling troops from Afghanistan on June 23, a day after President Barack Obama said the U.S. would withdraw 10,000 troops before the end of this year and an additional 23,000 by September 2012.

Sarkozy told journalists in Kabul yesterday that he will pull together a five-year French-Afghan development plan. “We should not abandon Afghanistan, but the manner in which we help it is going to change,” he said. “The withdrawal of troops is not disengagement. Afghans need to take charge of Afghanistan.”

Defense Minister Gerard Longuet said today at the National Assembly that a debate on France’s military operation in Afghanistan should be held in the Parliament.