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AFP

## 'Eight Afghan civilians killed' in air strike

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Afghan civilians may have been caught up in a NATO air strike against suspected Taliban insurgents, a foreign military spokesman said Saturday, amid claims up to eight civilians died.

A local official said that an imam, his wife and their six children were killed by an air strike in Nad Ali district in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province Friday.

The incident appears to be the latest in which Afghan civilians have been accidentally killed by NATO military operations. The issue is highly sensitive in Afghanistan after nearly ten years of war.

Explaining what happened, district governor Shadi Khan said: "A group of Taliban attacked a foot patrol of NATO forces.

"Subsequently, an air strike targeted the house of an imam of a mosque in the area. As a result the imam, his wife and six of their children were killed."

A spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul said foreign troops had been to discuss the incident with local elders.

"A coalition patrol was attacked by insurgents armed with RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades) and small arms fire in Nad Ali district," the spokesman said.

"The coalition forces responded with small arms fire and they continued with an air strike against the positions of insurgents.

"Shortly after the engagement, ISAF learned that civilians had been held captive by insurgents and may have been present during the strike."

Helmand provincial spokesman Daud Ahmadi said he was "aware that there have been some civilian casualties as a result of a NATO air strike in Nad Ali district" and that an official delegation had been dispatched to investigate.

ISAF insists it takes all measures possible to limit the number of civilian casualties in its operations in Afghanistan.

But the issue has in the past provoked angry protests and in March, President Hamid Karzai appeared to say that foreign troops should stop all operations in Afghanistan because of the issue.