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AFP

'Afghan children killed in NATO air strike'

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ASADABAD – An Afghan police commander said Friday that NATO warplanes targeting Taliban insurgents killed six children in a mountainous region of eastern Afghanistan known to be a militant hotbed.

The alliance said it was investigating claims that civilians had died following the air strike on Thursday against militants who were attacking a military outpost in the restive province of Kunar, which borders Pakistan.

Provincial police chief Khalilullah Ziayee told AFP that children were collecting scrap metal on the mountain when NATO aircraft dropped bombs to disperse Taliban fighters attacking a nearby base.

"In the bombardment six children, aged six to 12, were killed. Another child was injured," the police commander said.

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), NATO's US-led mission in Afghanistan, said it was investigating the allegations.

ISAF "officials are aware of civilian casualty allegations as a result of the engagement and are conducting an investigation," it said in a statement.

The force confirmed it carried out a "precision-guided" air strike in the area during an engagement with insurgents.

"An insurgent round was observed to have landed short of its target, allegedly killing an Afghan civilian in a cornfield," ISAF's statement said.

It said four rebels were killed in the air raid, though this could not be independently confirmed.

Kunar, a rugged and heavily wooded region, is one of the most troubled provinces in Afghanistan and the scene of a huge military operation by US-led forces and their Afghan counterparts earlier in the summer.

The US-led force has been responsible for scores of civilian deaths, mainly caused by air raids during battles with Taliban and other insurgents.

The issue of civilian casualties is highly sensitive with Afghan leaders who argue that such incidents erode public support for the Western-backed administration.

In a recent meeting with US congressmen and military officials, President Hamid Karzai said one of the reasons that the US-led "war on terror" had not yet succeeded was "because civilians were killed in this war".