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7 US troops killed in latest Afghanistan fighting

By Christopher Bodeen

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Seven U.S. troops have died in weekend attacks in Afghanistan's embattled southern and eastern regions, while officials found the bodies Sunday of five kidnapped campaign workers for a female candidate in the western province of Herat.



NATO soldiers are seen providing cover for a Chinook helicopter to land in a hostile territory of Khost province. The latest deaths bring to 42 the number of American forces who have died this month in Afghanistan after July's high of 66.

Two servicemen died in bombings Sunday in southern Afghanistan, while two others were killed in a bomb attack in the south on Saturday and three in fighting in the east the same day, NATO said. Their identities and other details were being withheld until relatives could be notified.

The latest deaths bring to 42 the number of American forces who have died this month in Afghanistan after July's high of 66. A total of 62 international forces have died in the country this month, including seven British troops.

Fighting is intensifying with the addition of 30,000 U.S. troops to bring the total number of international forces in Afghanistan to 120,000 — 100,000 of them American. Most of those new troops have been assigned to the southern insurgent strongholds of Helmand and Kandahar provinces where major battles are fought almost daily as part of a gathering drive to push out the Taliban.

The five campaign workers had been snatched Wednesday by armed men who stopped their two-vehicle convoy as it was traveling through remote countryside. Five others traveling in the vehicles had earlier been set free, according to a man who answered the phone at the home of candidate Fawzya Galani and declined to give his name.

Residents of Herat's Adraskan district reported finding the bodies early Sunday and they were later transported to the local morgue, district chief Nasar Ahmad Popul said.

No one has claimed responsibility for the killings, although Taliban insurgents have been waging a campaign of murder and intimidation in hopes of sabotaging the Sept. 18 parliamentary polls.

Galani may be a particular target of insurgents because she is one of only a few female candidates for the 249 seats in the lower house.

In a similar attack in Herat, parliamentary candidate Abdul Manan was shot and killed on Saturday on his way to a mosque by an assassin traveling on the back of a motorcycle.

A number of other candidates and their aides have been killed, injured or threatened around the country.

While streets in the capital Kabul are festooned with campaign posters, many Afghans say they don't plan to vote, either because of safety concerns or cynicism over ineffective government and widespread corruption.

Electoral officials cut the number of nationwide voting sites for the elections by nearly 1,000 to 5,897 because of security concerns.

Meanwhile on Sunday, two suicide bombers attempted to climb over the back wall of a compound housing the governor of the far western province of Farah, but were spotted by guards and shot, provincial police Chief Mohammad Faqir Askir said.

The men's vests exploded, although it wasn't clear if they detonated them themselves or if it was because they were hit by bullets, Askir said.

The explosions blasted a hole in the wall and blew out windows in the compound, but there were no reports of deaths or injuries, he said.

NATO said eight insurgents were killed in joint Afghan-NATO operations Saturday night in the province of Paktiya, including a Taliban commander, Naman, accused of coordinating roadside bomb attacks and the movement of ammunition, supplies and fighters.

Automatic weapons, grenades, magazines and bomb-making material were found in buildings in Zormat district along the mountainous border with Pakistan. Afghan leaders frequently complain that Pakistan is doing too little to prevent cross-border incursions and shut down insurgent safe havens in its territory.

Just south in Khost province, U.S. and Afghan troops fought back simultaneous attacks Saturday by around 50 insurgents wearing American uniforms and suicide vests on Forward Operating Base Salerno and nearby Camp Chapman, where seven CIA employees died in a suicide attack in December.

The early-morning raids appeared to be part of an insurgent strategy to step up attacks in widely scattered parts of the country as the U.S. focuses its resources on the battle around Kandahar.

Twenty-one attackers died while the Afghan Defense Ministry said two Afghan soldiers were killed and three wounded in the fighting. Four U.S. troops were wounded, NATO officials said.

U.S. and Afghan officials blamed the attack on the Haqqani network, a Pakistan-based faction of the Taliban with close ties to al-Qaida.

NATO has stepped up efforts to provide security to allow an election whose outcome will be generally accepted as credible.

Yet frictions have continued to mar the relationship between the government of President Hamid Karzai and its international partners, largely over the knotty question of endemic official corruption.

On Saturday, the government criticized U.S. media reports that numerous Afghan officials had allegedly received payments from the CIA — including one who reportedly took a bribe to block a wide-ranging probe into graft.

A presidential office statement did not address or deny any specific allegations, but called the reports an insult to the government and an attempt to defame people within it.

The statement came the same day as a top graft-battling Afghan prosecutor said he had been forced into retirement.

Deputy Attorney General Fazel Ahmed Faqiryar has complained that the attorney general and others are blocking corruption cases against high-ranking government officials. He said Attorney General Mohammad Ishaq Aliko wrote a retirement letter for him earlier in the week and that Karzai accepted it.