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Taliban steps up attacks in Kandahar with blasts

Deadly blasts rock Afghan city of Kandahar as insurgents fight back against coalition pressure

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Two explosions rocked Kandahar on Tuesday, the second day of deadly blasts in the southern Afghan city where Taliban insurgents are fighting back against U.S. and Afghan forces pushing into areas long held by the insurgents.

A car bomb and a second, smaller blast killed nine people, including one Afghan policeman, Kandahar provincial health director Qayum Pokhla said. Another 26 people were wounded, including police officers.

On Monday night, three explosions, just minutes apart, killed three Afghan police officers in the city. When police gathered to tend to the wounded after the first blast, two more explosions occurred, said Zelmai Ayubi, spokesman for the provincial governor of Kandahar.

Also Monday, Noor Ahman, deputy mayor in Kandahar, was killed in an insurgent attack and later in the day, Habibullah Aghonzada, a former district chief in Arghistan, was gunned down by assailants as he prayed at a packed mosque.

The NATO military coalition described the two as "dedicated public servants who sought to improve the lives of their fellow countrymen."

Separately, NATO reported that a service member died in a homemade bomb explosion in the south. The coalition did not disclose the service member's nationality or provide additional details of the death.

Control of Kandahar, the Taliban movement's birthplace, is seen as key to reversing Taliban momentum in the war. Afghan and NATO forces are engaged in a major operation to improve security in and around Kandahar to keep insurgents from staging attacks inside the city. Early Tuesday in Arghandab district outside Kandahar, NATO said it captured a Taliban leader suspected of coordinating attacks and arming Taliban fighters.

Trying to keep their grip on their stronghold, the Taliban are fighting with both weapons and rhetoric.

"America is operating in the districts of Kandahar, but the result will be that they will walk out with blood-filled, empty hands," Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef said.

"They could not achieve victory in nearly a decade," he said, noting that the war enters its tenth year on Thursday. "This shows they never will."

The NATO coalition is fighting an uphill battle to win the allegiance of people in Kandahar.

"When only the Taliban were ruling our land there was peace and tranquility. Since the Americans have set foot on our land, we don't have work and our health is no better," said Naseebullah Ghamjam, a 38-year-old laborer. "All we have seen is that Americans have constructed exceptionally massive compounds for themselves."

Azizullah Saiyal, 29, who drives heavy vehicles in Zhari district outside of Kandahar, said citizens have little trust in the international community or Afghan government officials.

"We hear that millions and billions of dollars are coming in our country, but where does all of the money go?" he asked. "I believe these years of war and loss of innocent lives makes it obvious that war can never bring in peace. We should start looking for alternatives now."