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Iran arrests six Afghan military officers, soldier: report

by Jay Deshmukh Jay Deshmukh
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Iran has arrested six Afghan military officers and a soldier who said they were hunting for Taliban militants in the border province of Sistan-Baluchestan, ISNA news agency reported on Sunday.

Border police arrested the seven Afghan military personnel 50 metres (yards) inside Iranian territory, border police commander Hossein Zolfaghari said, quoted by ISNA, without giving a date.

A police spokesman in Afghanistan's Farah province said the incident took place four days ago, when a patrol crossed the border by mistake during a dust storm.

Iran's Zolfaghari said the arrested group said they were "patrolling the area and hunting for Taliban (militants), and that they had no intention to enter Iranian soil."

Sistan-Baluchestan in southeast Iran bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan is an area rife with a Sunni Muslim Baluchi insurgency against Tehran, tribal unrest and drug smuggling.

"The case of the arrested people is being investigated by the judiciary," Zolfaghari said, adding that border police had confiscated a rocket-propelled grenade launcher and six rifles from the group.

The arrests were made as the "armed people driving a vehicle without a proper number plate crossed the border into Sistan-Baluchestan."

"They were stopped and arrested by border police after shots were fired," the officer said, without elaborating.

Mohammad Faqir Askar, a police spokesman in Afghanistan's border province of Farah, said those held in Iran include four border policemen and a border police officer.

"A heavy dust storm started as they were on patrol" in the Jowain area, he told AFP. "They got lost and mistakenly have merely crossed the border. They were arrested by the Iranian border guards four days ago.

"According to our information they are to be freed tomorrow (Monday) or the day after," he said.

Kabul has good ties with Tehran despite being heavily reliant militarily and financially on the United States, which has been at loggerheads with the Islamic republic for more than three decades.

But despite their rivalry, Washington and Tehran are both sworn enemies of the Sunni militia Taliban which ruled Kabul from 1996 to 2001, before being overthrown in a US-led invasion.

The news of the arrests of Afghan military personnel comes less than two weeks after Afghan police said they had seized nearly 20 tonnes of explosives stashed in boxes marked "food, toys and kitchenware" imported from Iran.

The discovery was made in the western Afghan province of Nimroz on the Iranian border.

Bombs made from old ammunition and explosives are the main weapon used by the Taliban and other insurgents fighting the Western-backed Afghan government and US-led troops deployed in Afghanistan.

Foreign military commanders and some Afghan officials have accused Iran of providing weapons to the Taliban, the chief group leading the insurgency in Afghanistan.

Tehran denies the charges and senior Afghan administration officials say they have no evidence against Iran.

Iran, meanwhile, often participates in conferences aimed at stabilising Afghanistan.

In August, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad hosted a mini-summit with his Afghan and Tajik counterparts at which he denounced the deployment of foreign troops and insisted regional countries resolve issues in Afghanistan.

Shiite Iran, which has close ethnic and religious ties with Afghanistan, has also long suffered from the impact of opium production in its eastern neighbour, with easily available heroin fuelling a big rise in drug use at home.

Afghanistan is the source of 90 percent of the world's heroin.