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## Militants Attack Civilian Contractor in Western Afghanistan

By RAY RIVERA and SHARIFULLAH SAHAK

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Insurgents attacked a logistics company that works with NATO in the western city of Herat on Thursday, igniting a three-hour gun battle that left two Afghan security guards and five insurgents dead, local officials said.

Afghan and coalition forces evacuated 31 civilians from the compound during the attack, which took place about a half mile from NATO's regional headquarters in Herat Province, said Sgt. Juan Ardura Santa Engracia, a spokesman for the regional NATO command. At least four people were wounded, according to initial unconfirmed reports.

Herat has been one of the safest major cities in the country and was among seven locations that began the transition from coalition troops to Afghan security forces in July, though NATO troops maintain a substantial presence there.

The attack was the latest to take place in or near a heavily fortified urban area. Militants staged a similar attack in the city of Kandahar on Monday that killed five people, including a senior police chief and three Afghan workers with the United Nations refugee agency. Last week a suicide bomber in a vehicle packed with explosives slammed into a NATO convoy here in the capital, Kabul, killing 17 people, including nine Americans.

Thursday's battle began around 10 a.m., when a suicide bomber targeting a logistics company that provides services for Italian troops detonated a vehicle packed with explosives at a checkpoint leading into the company's compound near the Herat airport, said Ali Ahmad Behishti, the head of reconnaissance for the Interior Ministry in Herat Province.

Another vehicle smashed into a second checkpoint and detonated seconds later, he said. The drivers were wearing Afghan Army uniforms, Mr. Behishti said.

After the explosions, three insurgents, also in army uniforms, stormed the compound and took positions inside a building, he said, exchanging gunfire with Afghan guards and security forces as NATO helicopters flew overhead. The final attacker was killed around 1:30 p.m., said Col. Abdul Zahir, director of the provincial Criminal Investigative Directorate.

In addition to the attack in Kandahar on Monday, Afghan authorities said that four Afghan laborers working for a development company on a road project in a rural area of Kandahar were kidnapped and found beheaded. Kandahar officials have not said for whom the laborers worked.