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Insurgent attacks ripple across Afghanistan

A suicide bomber kills 10 in the north while gunmen launch an assault on a coalition base in the east, before a NATO summit to plot its future mission in the country.

By Laura King, Los Angeles Times

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Violence hopped across Afghanistan on Saturday, as a bombing killed 10 people in a northern province and coalition troops repelled an assault by a squad of gunmen and suicide bombers on a base in the country's eastern region.

In Afghanistan's south, North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces reported the deaths of three service members in an insurgent attack. It did not provide details or release the nationalities of those killed, but most of the troops serving in the south are Americans.

The heightened tempo of attacks comes days before NATO nations gather for a summit to consider the course of the alliance's Afghan mission.

The insurgents appear eager to demonstrate that setbacks in the south, where the U.S. military has claimed major progress in breaking the Taliban's grip on districts surrounding Kandahar city, will not hinder them from regrouping elsewhere.

U.S. Marines have also been suffering significant casualties in recent weeks as they stage an aggressive push in Helmand province, which neighbors Kandahar.

This has been the deadliest year of the nine-year war for Western soldiers and Afghan civilians alike. The NATO force also says that over the last several months it has wiped

out many mid-level insurgent commanders and foot soldiers in pinpoint raids targeting both the Taliban and a virulent offshoot known as the Haqqani network.

The early morning attack Saturday on an observation post on the edge of the main NATO air base in the eastern city of Jalalabad left six insurgents dead, Western military officials said. The failed attempt to storm the installation set off fighting that lasted two hours, with the NATO force calling in air support.

No fatalities were reported among coalition forces.

The attack fit a pattern of multipronged assaults by insurgents seeking to exploit any potential lapse in security at Western installations. Insurgents last month lost dozens of fighters when they tried to overrun a U.S. outpost in Paktia province.

As in previous attacks, at least some of the assailants wore Afghan army uniforms, a tactic meant to at least momentarily confuse the defenders.

The Taliban painted the assault in Jalalabad as a success, claiming to have killed dozens of coalition troops. Such exaggerations are routine, but the insurgents reap propaganda value merely by demonstrating the ability carry out such assaults.

Their calculations appear to take into account the likelihood of heavy insurgent casualties, because even briefly penetrating a well-defended Western installation would represent a major coup.

In Afghanistan's increasingly restive north, a bomb planted on a motorbike blew up in a busy market area in the district of Imam Sahib, a longtime trouble spot in Kunduz province. Three children were among the dead, the Interior Ministry said. Also killed was a senior police official who may have been the target of the blast.

Until about a year ago, the north was relatively calm, but the Taliban and other groups have made major inroads in a swath of provinces, threatening a major NATO supply route and taxing Western resources amid the military push in the south.