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Panetta escapes assassination attempt

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The US Defense Secretary has been the target of a suspected car bomb attack after a man drove a stolen vehicle onto the runway where Leon Panetta's plane was to land in Afghanistan, reports say.

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said in a statement that "the alleged perpetrator" had been detained.

"At no point was the secretary or anyone on the aircraft in any danger from this incident," it added on Wednesday.

Speaking to reporters in Kabul, Panetta's spokesman, George Little, confirmed the incident saying an Afghan man crashed into a ditch before emerging from the vehicle "ablaze."

It is not yet clear whether the incident was a coincidence or Panetta was the victim of a targeted attack.

Little said the vehicle struck and injured an ISAF service member.

Panetta's visit comes after a US trooper on Sunday shot dead more than 16 Afghan civilians inside their homes-- most of them women and children -- in southern province of Kandahar.

The US defense secretary held talks with provincial leaders and also addressed around 200 US Marines and other troops in a tent at Camp Leatherneck, who were suddenly asked by their commander to get up, place their weapons outside the tent and then return unarmed.

Civilian casualties in Afghanistan have been a major source of tension between Kabul and Washington.

Anti-American sentiments in Afghanistan have also risen due to the desecration of the Holy Qur'an in a US-run military airbase last month.