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As NATO prepares to meet, Taliban attack reminder of volatility in Afghanistan

By Ali

May 17, 2012

Three days ahead of a summit meeting in Chicago of NATO leaders to plot their countries' departure from Afghanistan, the Taliban on Thursday provided a stark reminder of the challenges that lie ahead.

Armed with AK-47 assault rifles, suicide explosive vests and rocket propelled grenades, and dressed in Afghan police uniforms, a team of insurgents stormed the governor's compound in the capital of western Farah province, killing six policemen and a civilian, security officials said.

The attackers threw a hand grenade at guards at the compound gate before entering the building, said Mohammad Ghaus Malyar, Farah's deputy police chief.

The ensuing firefight last for 30 minutes before government security forces shot and killed the invaders, Malyar said.

Twelve people – nine civilians and three policemen – were wounded in the attack, Malyar said, but the director of Farah's hospital, Abdul Manan, put the number of injured at 15, with two of those wounded in critical condition.

A woman and a child were among the victims, said Manan.

The apparent target of the attack was Farah's newly-appointed governor, Dr. Mohammad Akram Khpalwak. One attacker got close to the governor's office, but was shot dead by the deputy governor, Malyar said. The governor was unharmed.

U.S. and Italian troops are responsible for security in Farah, but were not involved in the fighting. On Sunday, the Afghan government announced plans to transfer security responsibilities for Farah to Afghan forces as part of a third phase of transfers that will include the capitals of all 34 Afghan provinces.

The Taliban announced the start of their spring offensive earlier this month and said it would include the targeting of government officials. A Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, claimed responsibility for Thursday's attack in a statement posted on the insurgents' website.

NATO forces are expected to withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. How to accomplish that is expected to be the primary topic of a two-day summit meeting scheduled to begin Sunday in Chicago. In addition to President Barack Obama and the other heads of NATO's 28 member countries, the leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan are expected to take part in the discussions.

Safi is a McClatchy special correspondent.