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Car Bomb Kills 8 Afghans From Unit Linked to C.I.A.

By DECLAN WALSH

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Eight Afghan paramilitary soldiers were killed during an assault on a Taliban hide-out in eastern Afghanistan, Afghan officials said Wednesday. It was the latest of several clashes to take a heavy toll on the security forces as American combat forces leave the country.

The deaths, caused by a car bomb, occurred during a raid by the Khost Protection Force, a C.I.A.-trained paramilitary unit that has carried out operations along the border with Pakistan for more than a decade.

Fighters with the force, who operate in Khost Province, swooped on a remote compound believed to house suicide bombers, killing three people including one woman, the Khost governor's office said in a statement. But once they had secured the compound, a car bomb exploded, killing eight of the militiamen and wounding five.

The governor's spokesman, Mohammad Mubarez Zadran, confirmed in a phone interview that the troops belonged to the Khost militia force, established by the C.I.A. and American Special

Operations forces after 2001, and which The Associated Press reported in May had up to 3,500 fighters.

The future of the Khost Protection Force, and others like it in various Afghan provinces, has been unclear as the C.I.A. withdraws from remote Afghan bases in concert with the broader drawdown of American combat troops from Afghanistan. Some of the units were earmarked to be handed over to the Afghan intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security, after this year.

The Khost force operates on the border with North Waziristan, the Pakistani tribal belt that is a major hub for the Taliban and the allied Haqqani Network, which has leveraged its ability to straddle the border to carry out numerous attacks on high-profile Western and Afghan targets in Afghanistan.

The Khost Protection Force, which generally maintains a low profile, has until recently been one of the largest of several C.I.A.-sponsored paramilitary forces along the border. During the Obama administration's troop surge in 2010 and 2011, some American news reports said it had carried out illegal cross-border raids, with support from armed American drones, to attack Qaeda and Taliban fighters in North Waziristan.

Those attacks came at a time of high tension between the United States and Pakistan over the situation in North Waziristan. American officials were angered by close ties between the Haqqani Network and Pakistani military intelligence, while Pakistanis privately complained of cross-border interference from American forces and spies based in southern Afghanistan.

Drawn from local tribes, the Khost Protection Force initially enticed recruits with the promise of higher pay and better conditions than the regular Afghan Army. "The food, the training, everything is better," Mohammed Yousuf, a medic with the force, told Newsday in 2004.

Until recently, it had been unusual for Afghan officials to publicly acknowledge its operations. In an interview in July 2011 the outgoing commander of American forces in Afghanistan, Gen. David Petraeus, described it as "a border force that is quite effective and well supported."

The deaths in Khost occurred as the Taliban stepped up a renewed assault on government forces across the country in recent days, following a relative lull in violence that coincided with last week's Eid al-Adha religious holiday.

In the southern province of Helmand, Taliban fighters killed Muhammad Anwar, the district governor of Nad Ali district, in an ambush on his vehicle late Tuesday.

Nad Ali district is a major center of opium poppy cultivation and was the scene of heavy fighting between Western and Taliban fighters during the American troops surge in 2010-11. Mr. Anwar was considered a staunch anti-Taliban force in the area and had personally participated in battles against the insurgents.

Zabiullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, took responsibility for the attack, in which at least two policemen were also killed.