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AFP

Taliban torch 16 NATO tankers in Pakistan

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Taliban militants in southwestern Pakistan set ablaze 16 vehicles carrying fuel supplies for NATO troops in Afghanistan on Saturday, officials said.

The convoy was attacked before dawn outside the town of Dera Murad Jamali, some 400 kilometres (250 miles) southeast of Quetta, the capital of restive Baluchistan province, local administration chief Abdul Fatah Khajjak said.

"The attackers, riding in a car, opened fire on oil tankers parked at a petrol pump waiting for daybreak to resume their journey to Afghanistan," Khajjak said.

Some 16 oil tankers caught fire, but two more parked a distance away were undamaged, he said. A driver's assistant was wounded by the gunfire.

Militants fled after the attack, Khajjak said. A security official confirmed the incident.

Pakistani Taliban spokesman Azam Tariq in a phone call to AFP claimed responsibility for the attack.

"It is in retaliation to drone attacks in tribal areas," Tariq said from an undisclosed location in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region.

"We will continue to attack NATO supply vehicles and warn those operating them to immediately stop doing it otherwise they may also be targeted," he said.

In 2010 the US doubled missile attacks in Pakistan's tribal areas, which it describes as the global headquarters of Al-Qaeda, with around 100 drone strikes killing more than 650 people, according to an AFP tally.

Pakistan tacitly cooperates with the bombing campaign, which US officials say has severely weakened Al-Qaeda's leadership, but Islamabad has stalled on launching a ground offensive in North Waziristan, saying its troops are overstretched.

In October, gunmen torched 29 oil tankers also bound for Afghanistan in the remote Mitri area, 180 kilometres (112 miles) southeast of Quetta.

Baluchistan, which borders both Iran and Afghanistan, is torn by Islamist militancy, sectarian violence between majority Sunnis and minority Shiite Muslims, and a separatist insurgency by rebels seeking political autonomy and a greater share of profits from natural resources.

Most supplies and equipment required by foreign troops in Afghanistan are shipped through Pakistan, although US troops increasingly use alternative routes through central Asia.

Pakistan shut its main northwestern border crossing to NATO supply vehicles on September 30 for 11 days after a cross-border NATO helicopter assault killed two Pakistani soldiers.

Scores of NATO supply vehicles were destroyed in gun and arson attacks while the border crossing was shut, with Taliban militants determined to disrupt the route and avenge US drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal belt.