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Reuters

NATO troops kill 4 Afghans on bus - provincial official

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Foreign forces opened fire on a bus in southern Afghanistan on Monday, killing four civilians and wounding 18 others, a provincial official said.

The issue of civilian casualties caused by international forces is an emotive one in Afghanistan and undermines support for their presence in the country. It has also created a rift between Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the West.

"A foreign military convoy fired on a passenger bus and killed four civilians and wounded 18 more," said Zalmay Ayoubi, spokesman for the governor of Kandahar province.

The incident took place in Zhari district, to the west of Kandahar city, said Ayoubi. The bus had been travelling along the country's main ring road from Kandahar to Herat city in the west.

A spokesman for NATO-led forces said he was aware of an incident involving civilian casualties in Kandahar on Monday and that a joint Afghan-NATO assessment team had been sent to the area. He did not have any more details on the incident.

The latest incident comes less than a week after NATO said it had launched an investigation into whether its forces had killed four civilians -- two women, a child and an elderly man -- in an air strike in southern Helmand province.

Earlier this month, NATO acknowledged it had killed five Afghan civilians, including three women, during a botched night raid on a home in the southeast of the country in February. [ID:nSGE63301Q]

The United Nations says new guidelines issued by the commander of NATO and U.S. forces last year have helped reduce the number of civilian casualties, but such incidents still cause deep anger among Afghans the foreign troops are meant to protect. While the United Nations says foreign and Afghan troops killed 25 percent fewer civilians last year than in 2008, civilian deaths rose overall, because the number killed by insurgents rose 40 percent.

More than 2,400 civilians were killed in 2009, making it the deadliest year of a war now more than eight years old. There are some 130,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, set to rise to 150,000 by the year's end.