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12 Iranian engineers kidnapped in Afghanistan

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Armed assailants kidnapped 12 Iranian engineers building a road in western Afghanistan, said Iranian and Afghan officials Monday.

Iran Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said the Iranian engineers were working for a construction company in the western Farah Province and the incident was under investigation by Iranian and Afghan authorities.

Militants in the area claimed responsibility for the kidnapping and threatened to kill the hostages if work on the road is not halted, said Gen. Sayed Mohammad, the police chief for Farah province.

"For the time being the road construction has stopped. Police have launched a search operation in the area where they were kidnapped," he said.

Mohammad added that according to his information, there were 13 Iranians taken along with two Afghans while driving toward their work site in two vehicles.

The reason for the discrepancy in the numbers was not immediately clear.

The director of public works for the province, Ghulman Hazrat Shahiq, said they worked for a company called Jahidi Nasri Tehran, contracted to create 75 miles (121 kilometers) of road in Farah and has completed about half.

Kidnappings — mostly of Afghans — for ransom or for political reasons are common in Afghanistan, where violence has made efforts to rebuild the country costly and dangerous.