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Reuter

Afghan Taliban launch brazen attack on NATO base

By Hamid Shalizi

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Suicide bombers carrying rockets and grenades launched a brazen pre-dawn attack on one of the biggest military bases of NATO in Afghanistan on Tuesday, leaving at least seven guerrillas dead and six foreign troops wounded.

The fighting, which was continuing late into the morning, came the day after a suicide bomber attacked a NATO-led military convoy in Kabul, killing 12 Afghan civilians and six foreign troops, and may herald the start of an announced Taliban offensive against high-profile foreign targets.

The attack on Bagram air base, about an hour's drive north of Kabul and holding mainly U.S. troops, began in the pre-dawn hours when Taliban insurgents blew themselves up near the base's gates.

It continued with sporadic fire of rockets and small arms outside the base.

One rocket landed inside the base, causing minor damage, but no insurgents managed to get inside Bagram, according to NATO.

Helicopter gunships hovered about the base.

"We're always prepared to deal with attacks on our base, the response this morning was immediate," said Lt. Col. Clarence Counts, a spokesman for the Bagram base.

Four suicide bombers blew themselves up outside the base's gates. The Taliban said others managed to get inside, but the group often exaggerates their operations.

Senior police official Lutful Rahman said security forces were searching for one other bomber.

BOOST FOR TALIBAN?

The latest attacks may boost the stature of the Taliban after the arrests of some senior leaders early this year in Pakistan, combined with a belated announcement for the spring offensive, had some saying the insurgents were on the defensive.

The Taliban have announced an offensive from May 20 against the government, foreign forces and diplomats in Afghanistan in response to NATO plans for an operation against the group's southern stronghold of Kandahar.

"The Taliban are trying to show their reaction to the expected plan of NATO's operation in Kandahar in coming weeks" said Noor Ul-Haq Ulomi, a former general during the ex-communist regime in the 1980s.

"(They) want to show ahead of it that they are strong as before and even getting stronger ... They want to show that with their small groups they are able to conduct organized attacks on NATO forces in Kabul and on their base in Bagram," he said.

Bagram is the main base for the U.S.-led troops in Afghanistan, with the largest airfield in the country. It was used by the former Soviet Union during its invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The sprawling base is in the fertile Shomali plains and surrounded by hundreds of mud houses of a nearby village.

"It was 3:30 in the morning when I heard gunshots and four explosions," said Mohammad Najib, who lives close to the base.

"Minutes later two helicopters were firing heavily into orchards around the base," he said.

While there are regular roadside bomb attacks against foreign troops in the Taliban stronghold of southern Afghanistan, high profile attacks such as the Bagram and Kabul assaults are rarer.

The capital of four million people is heavily guarded with dozens of checkpoints staffed by the Afghan army and police, who took over responsibility for the city's security more than a year ago.

Removed from power in a U.S.-led invasion in 2001, the Taliban have made a comeback in recent years despite the growing number of foreign troops, now standing at some 140,000.

Thousands of extra U.S. troops have been arriving in Afghanistan as part of President Barack Obama's strategy for turning the tide against the militants for winning the Afghan war, which he has termed a high foreign policy priority.

(Additional reporting by Golnar Motevalli and