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AFP

Afghan attacks kill 11 civilians, three NATO soldiers

By Nasrat Shoaib

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KANDAHAR – Eleven civilians including women and children and three NATO soldiers were killed Friday in attacks in Afghanistan, as US Defense Secretary Robert Gates urged patience with the war.

Nine civilians, including four women and three children, died when a bomb ripped through a minibus travelling along the main road leading to the capital of Kandahar province.

Eight other civilians were wounded in the attack, which took place in the Maywand area, provincial government spokesman Zalmai Ayobi told AFP. Five of the wounded in critical condition were airlifted by NATO forces to a military hospital.

Kandahar city is the heartland of the Taliban insurgency, under way now for nearly nine years.

Also on Friday two NATO soldiers and two Afghan civilians were killed by a bomb explosion in a small market in Zabul province. NATO attributed the blast to an improvised explosive device while local authorities said it was a suicide attack.

A third soldier was killed in an attack in the east, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said.

That brought to 27 the number of NATO soldiers killed since Sunday. In total, 257 foreign soldiers have died in Afghanistan since the start of the year.

NATO forces are engaged in a major build-up centred on Kandahar aimed at bringing the war to an end and drawing down foreign troop levels.

But the last week saw an upsurge in Taliban attacks and the alliance has announced a two-to-three month delay in the peak of operations.

On Wednesday 40 people died in a suicide attack on a wedding outside Kandahar city attended by members of an anti-Taliban militia, one of the deadliest incidents so far this year.

In Brussels NATO defence ministers said progress was being made in Afghanistan, at the close of a two-day meeting.

"Operations across Afghanistan are making measured progress in extending the reach of the Afghan government, changing the political conditions, and marginalising the insurgency," the ministers said in a statement.

"Significant challenges remain, and success is not yet assured," they said, "but we are encouraged by recent results."

Gates acknowledged that the signs of progress so far were "tentative", but said a promising new approach involving the massive troop surge had only been under way a few months and needed time.

"As far as I'm concerned this endeavour began in full, and reasonably resourced only a few months ago," Gates said.

He said Afghanistan had been neglected by Washington after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, with too few troops deployed, and that a "long and difficult" fight lay ahead.

"What my expectation and what my hope is by the end of the year we will be able to demonstrate that we have the right strategy, and that we are making progress throughout the country," Gates said.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, visiting troops in the southern province of Helmand, said "big progress" was being made in Afghanistan.

He said he could "sum up this mission in two words: national security -- our national security back in the UK."