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www.afgazad.com

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AFP

Eight Afghan police killed in checkpoint attack

by Mohammad Arif Yaqoubi
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Eight Afghan police were killed Wednesday when Taliban attacked their checkpoint in a brazen assault likely to raise fresh security questions as the United States prepares a troop drawdown.

The attack in Ghazni province's Qarabagh district, about 120 kilometres (75 miles) southwest of Kabul, is thought to have been an inside job in which insurgents worked with a policeman at the checkpoint to strike.

"The attack started at around 7:00 am (2:30 GMT)," Sayed Amir Shah, the head of Afghanistan's intelligence agency in Ghazni province, told AFP, putting the death toll at eight after the fighting had stopped.

Mohammad Ali Ahmadi, the deputy provincial governor of Ghazni, confirmed the number of dead.

"Probably one of the police officers at the checkpoint had a previous deal with the insurgents and cooperated with and facilitated the assault," he said.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack in a text message sent to AFP. Earlier this month, three police were killed in a similar insurgent strike on their checkpoint in the same district.

The assault came just hours before President Barack Obama is to use a prime time speech to order a US troop drawdown from Afghanistan, which one official said would likely see 10,000 soldiers back in the United States this year.

But despite concerns from some experts about the preparedness of Afghan forces to fill the gap left by drawdowns, defence ministry spokesman General Mohammad Zahir Azimi insisted they were well placed to do so.

"We welcome the decision of the people and president of the United States of America regarding withdrawal of a number of troops and we support such a decision," he said at a press conference in Kabul.

"The national army of Afghanistan has gained the capacity to fill the gap that will come up in some areas after withdrawal of these troops... we are able to fill the personnel shortage."

Afghan forces are due to take increasing responsibility for security between July, when the transition process starts, and the end of 2014, when all foreign combat troops are due to have withdrawn.

A senior US official said on condition of anonymity that Obama would "likely" order the return of about 5,000 troops this summer and 5,000 more by the end of the year.

Another 20,000 troops, part of a 30,000-strong surge ordered in December 2009, would be withdrawn by the end of next year, meaning elevated force levels would remain through two more Afghan summer fighting seasons.

It would still leave more American troops in Afghanistan than when Obama was elected to office in November 2008.

But war sceptics argue that after the deaths of more than 1,600 US service personnel and at a cost of nearly \$10 billion a month, the American commitment is unsustainable at its present size.

There are currently around 130,000 international troops in Afghanistan under the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) including some 90,000 from the United States.