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AFP

NATO helicopter downed in Afghanistan

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A NATO helicopter crashed in the restive east of Afghanistan on Monday, and foreign troops battled an insurgent attack during the rescue operation, the coalition force said.

NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said the crew and passengers received only minor injuries in the incident. A police official said the helicopter appeared to have been downed by a rocket-propelled grenade.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the crash, saying that two insurgents had died but that their forces killed 22 foreign troops. The rebels frequently exaggerate claims of their battlefield successes.

"An (ISAF) helicopter crashed in eastern Afghanistan today," said an ISAF statement. "As coalition rescue forces approached the crash site, they came under enemy fire.

"Coalition forces returned fire, with small arms, while working to secure the site of the crash. All passengers and crew members have been secured and safely transported to a nearby base."

The police chief of Manogai district in eastern Kunar province said the crash happened shortly after midnight.

"Last night a Chinook helicopter was hit and crashed. We don't know about casualties but the helicopter is totally destroyed. It appeared it was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade," said police chief Gul Rahman.

He said other ISAF helicopters had flown in and returned fire on the gunmen and that the bodies of two insurgents had been found at dawn.

U.S. commanders have said the focus of the war is moving from the Taliban heartlands of the south to the country's east, which borders the lawless tribal regions of Pakistan believed to hold host bases for insurgent leaders.

There are nearly 150,000 foreign troops battling to beat the Taliban and build support for President Hamid Karzai's Western-backed government, installed following the toppling of the Taliban in a U.S.-led invasion in late 2001.