

Taliban influence in N Afghanistan to cripple NATO mission

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KABUL: While NATO has been endeavoring to sweep Taliban insurgents out from their hotbed in southern Afghanistan, the militants by influencing the northern provinces have opened a new front against the western military alliance.

The militants have stretched their activities in the relatively peaceful Faryab, Balkh, Kunduz and Baghlan provinces which link the Afghan capital Kabul to the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia.

Militants on Thursday night attacked and injured three soldiers of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Balkh province while Kunduz and Baghlan have been turned into a hub of insurgents.

Parts of Baghlan province, the particularly Baghlan-e-Markazi district, have been the scenes of almost continued skirmishes over the past couple of months.

In addition to Taliban fighters, militants loyal to the dissident warlord and former Prime Minister Gulbudin Hekmatyar-led outlawed Islamic Party, the Hizb-e-Islami, are active in the strategically important Baghlan province.

An individual, Al-Hadid, who claims to speak for the outfit, in talks with media from an undisclosed location said Saturday that Hizb's men clashed with Afghan and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops in Kokchinar village Friday, killing two Afghan soldiers and four international troops....

Meantime, Taliban fighters attacked German forces in the Shikhmir area of Chardara district Saturday morning....

Militancy has escalated in the north of Afghanistan amid U.S. and NATO efforts to secure a second supply line through Russia and Central Asian states in the wake of frequent attacks on NATO's logistic convoys in Pakistan.

Taliban insurgents, according to media reports, have carried out a series of dreadful attacks against NATO's logistic convoys in Pakistan since early this year, during which scores of trucks have been destroyed and their drivers have either been killed or threatened with dire consequences if they continue to supply fuel to the troops.

The militants have repeatedly attacked NATO logistic convoys passing through Pakistan into Afghanistan in the Khyber Pass and Spin Boldak and according to media reports only in late

August Taliban loyalists attacked a logistics convoy in Spin Boldak, destroying over a dozen military vehicles and trucks.

Furthermore, the militants, in an attempt to mount pressure on the troops, have closed down the Khyber Pass seven times this year for NATO convoys.

In order to adequately supply the 100,000-strong forces in the post-Taliban country, NATO's political leadership has looked for alternative routes and approached Russia and Central Asian nations.

NATO spokesman James Appathurai said on Tuesday that an agreement the military alliance needs "for the northern corridor will be reached soon."

Russia, according to the spokesman, has agreed to allow NATO to supply its troops in Afghanistan through the northern corridor which includes Russian soil and central Asian countries.

The northern corridor links Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to NATO-led ISAF forces' Headquarters in Kabul through Kunduz, Baghlan and Balkh provinces, while militants' presence in the region would seriously affect the alternative supply line for troops in Afghanistan.

To control the situation, NATO's supreme commander in Afghanistan General Stanley McChrystal, according to media reports, has asked for an additional 40,000 troops, adding that the security situation was deteriorating in the north and western provinces.

The security situation has been deteriorating in the northern provinces, while the insurgents have gained a foothold in the eastern Nuristan province.

Militants overran the Kamdush district close to Pakistan's border after killing over a dozen troops including eight U.S. soldiers overran last Saturday.

While the fragile security situation has worried the Afghans and international community [sic], U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates has noted that "[it would be a] mistake to set a deadline to end U.S. military action and a defeat [that] would be disastrous for the U.S."

Moreover, governor of Afghanistan's northern Balkh province Atta Mohammad Noor warned very recently that, "certain circles distribute weapons to irresponsible people in the north."

The security situation, if it goes unchecked in the north of Afghanistan, would double NATO's challenge in achieving its mission in the militancy-plagued post-Taliban Central Asian nation.

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