

Taliban Attacks Highly Regarded Afghan Army Unit
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KABUL, Afghanistan — Taliban insurgents dealt a serious blow to one of the Afghan Army's most highly regarded units on Friday, killing 13 soldiers and overrunning their outpost in eastern Afghanistan.

It was one of a series of bloody attacks by the insurgents during their current spring offensive, which has helped drive the rate of government fatalities to the highest level of the war. Afghan soldiers and policemen are dying at a rate more than double the rate a year ago, according to military officials.

The numbers underscore how much more of the fighting has been handed over to Afghan forces and raise questions about their readiness for the increased responsibility. Within the next few months, the NATO transfer of security operations to the Afghans will be complete, with their forces responsible for security in 100 percent of the country, and NATO and American military forces moving to a support and training role as their numbers decline.

"We know the enemy's going to come out hard this summer, so the numbers are going to go up," said Col. Thomas Collins, a spokesman for the International Security Assistance Force, the formal name of the NATO-led military coalition.

Friday's attack was on a battalion that was among only a handful of [Afghan Army](#) battalions rated by the United States military as independent and able to operate on their s own without foreign advisers. It was one of two such battalions that had been deployed without advisers recently in Kunar Province, according to a military official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the subject.

The Third Battalion was assigned to hold the Narai district, a rugged, mountainous area near the Pakistani border, on an important insurgent infiltration route.

According to Afghan security officials, also speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the Taliban victory, 13 Afghan National Army soldiers were killed, the entire complement of a remote check post. One police official said 200 Taliban fighters had overrun the post, opening fire with heavy weapons and finally setting it on fire; most of the deaths were from the flames.

A spokesman for the Taliban, Zabiullah Mujahid, took credit for the attack. He claimed that 15 soldiers had been killed and that the insurgents had captured all of their weapons and ammunition before leaving the post.

It was a measure of the sensitivity of the episode that officials publicly played down the death count, with a spokesman for the 201st Corps confirming only that an incident had taken place, and the Kunar Province police chief, Gen. Habib Saidkheli, claiming that only two soldiers had been killed in the attack.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Defense, however, was quoted by The Associated Press as saying

that 13 soldiers were killed.

The battalion was part of the Second Brigade, which has been widely praised as among the best of the Afghan Army's formations.

While it is still early in the spring fighting season to generalize, the insurgents have carried out several attacks recently using foot soldiers, or what the military calls "complex attacks," involving bombings as well as firefights. Last year, the insurgents relied largely on suicide bombers and roadside bombings and avoided engaging directly with Afghan or international military forces.

But there have been several such direct engagements in recent weeks, however. In March, ground attacks by the insurgents killed four police officers and four Afghan soldiers in the Dangaam district of Kunar Province. Officials there said Friday's attack was the deadliest in at least six months.

In northern Badakhshan Province, an area with little previous insurgent activity, Taliban forces ambushed a convoy and killed 17 Afghan soldiers sent to reinforce police posts there on March 7. Most were executed after being captured, according to Afghan officials.

Then on March 25, 10 more Afghan soldiers were captured in the same area; their fate is unclear.

On April 3, one of the deadliest insurgent attacks of the war was launched in western Farah Province by nine Taliban fighters dressed as Afghan soldiers. They stormed a government compound, killing 10 soldiers and 34 civilians, and wounding more than 100 people.

Colonel Collins said the increased death toll among Afghan forces was "tragic," but did not have any long-term impact. "It doesn't seem to be impairing their recruiting any," he said.

The Afghan National Army, which is a volunteer force, has to replace and train nearly a third of its force every year because of desertions and attrition.

The death toll among Afghan forces has been steadily climbing in recent years as their size has grown dramatically and they have taken over more of the fighting. By 2012, it had topped 1,000 dead for the army for the year, and an estimated 1,400 dead for the Afghan police forces, according to Afghan government estimates.

Late last year, Gen. Mohammad Zahir Azimi, the spokesman for the Afghan military, said at a news conference at NATO headquarters that 110 soldiers and 200 policemen were dying each month.

Asked about those numbers on Friday, however, he repudiated them, but said he did not have correct figures immediately available.

Nonetheless, NATO officials have said those numbers are generally accurate.

By comparison, 25 NATO soldiers, most of them Americans, were killed in the first three months of 2013, according to figures compiled by [Icasualties](#), an independent monitoring group. A third of them were victims of aircraft accidents, not hostile attacks.