

Two American soldiers among 26 dead in joint raids by US-Afghan forces targeting Taliban

03/11/2016 21:45 by admin

Kabul: Two American soldiers were killed and two others were injured in a joint raid by US and Afghan forces targeting senior Taliban commanders in the Kunduz province in the northern part of the country.

File pic - US soldiers on foot patrolling in Afghanistan.

According to Afghanistan's Defence Ministry, three soldiers of Afghan Special Forces were also killed in the clash.

The firefight occurred as American soldiers were assisting Afghan troops in clearing a Taliban position and disrupt the group's operations in Kunduz, US forces said in a brief statement.

NATO described the Americans killed and two other Americans wounded in the assault as being part of "a train, advise and assist mission" in Kunduz province.

Meanwhile, Afghan officials said they were still investigating the attack and its civilian casualties, some of which may have been caused by an airstrike.

"Today's loss is heartbreaking and we offer our deepest condolences to the families and friends of our service members who lost their lives today," Gen. John W. Nicholson, commander of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, said in a statement.

NATO declined to identify those killed, pending notification of the next of kin. NATO and the Pentagon did not respond to a request for comment from The Associated Press to further clarify the American troops' mission in the area.

The target of the raid appeared to be two senior Taliban commanders killed in the fighting among 65 insurgents, Kunduz police chief Gen. Qasim Jangalbagh said. He said Afghan special forces carried out the raid and that he did not have any information about NATO involvement in the assault.

Jangalbagh said 26 civilians, including members of the Taliban fighters' families, were killed in the assault.

Kunduz official Mohammad Yousf Ayoubi and parliament member Malim Chari both also told the AP that civilians were killed in the fighting, though they had few details. Dr. Mohammad Naim Mangal, the director of a Kunduz hospital, said his facility received the bodies of a dead man and a child and treated 30 people, including children, wounded in the fighting.

NATO only said it was "aware of the allegations," while the Pentagon did not immediately respond.

U.S. Brig. Gen. Charles Cleveland, briefing journalists in Brussels during a teleconference, said three Afghan troops were killed in the assault and that an investigation was underway. Asked about the incident, he said: "It is not a common event." He declined to elaborate.

A Taliban statement also said there were civilian casualties while claiming its fighters killed 16 U.S. troops. The insurgents often exaggerate their battlefield successes.

Taliban fighters briefly overran the city of Kunduz, the provincial capital with the same name, in early October, a show of strength by the insurgents that also highlighted the troubles facing local Afghan forces 15 years after the U.S.-led invasion of the country. The Taliban captured and held parts of Kunduz a year earlier as well before the city was fully

liberated weeks later with the help of U.S. airstrikes.

Those 2015 airstrikes also saw a U.S. Air Force special operations AC-130 gunship attack a Kunduz hospital run by the medical charity Doctors Without Borders, killing 42 people. Sixteen U.S. military personnel, including a two-star general, later were disciplined for what American officials described as mistakes that led the strike. Doctors Without Borders has called the attack a war crime and demanded an independent investigation.

NATO's combat operations ended in Afghanistan at the end of 2014, a move that put Afghan forces in charge of the country's security. Since then, Afghan forces have suffered heavy casualties battling the Taliban, who have at times overrun provincial capitals before being pushed back. Meanwhile, NATO and U.S. casualties have been few.

There have been at least other four combat deaths among American forces in Afghanistan in 2016. In October, a U.S. soldier was killed by a bomb in Nangarhar province while another was shot dead by a man wearing an Afghan army uniform in Kabul. In August, an American soldier was killed and another wounded by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan's southern Helmand province. In January, a U.S. soldier was killed by small arms fire in Helmand.

The fight in Afghanistan "American's longest war" began after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks as the Taliban harbored al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden. The Taliban and Afghan government recently held secret talks to see if they could start peace negotiations to end the fighting, though questions remain over which faction of the insurgency is doing the talking.

- With AP Inputs