

Guards to Protect Aid Workers

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The deteriorating security situation prompts UN to bolster protection for members of its relief teams.

The United Nations has said armed guards will accompany all its employees as they go about their business in southeastern Afghanistan, after a series of attacks on aid workers in the region.

The announcement was made on May 15, hours after gunmen opened fire on two Afghan members of a UN mine-clearing team as they were driving between the towns of Gardez and Khost.

Both men were wounded, one of them critically. Haji Hayatullah, an official in the Khost provincial government, said this was the fourth time a de-mining team had been targeted in the past month.

A UN spokesman told reporters that the Afghan government had agreed to provide armed guards for its employees in the provinces of Nimruz, Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul as well as in southern Uruzgan and eastern Farah.

He said that the UN would keep Afghan authorities informed about commonly used routes, adding that employees of different aid agencies would travel together in the region, whenever possible.

The past few weeks have witnessed an upsurge in attacks on foreign aid workers and soldiers in the country.

Seven de-miners have been injured in the past two months, and one has been killed. Other recent casualties include a Red Cross worker and an Italian tourist.

It is unclear whether these incidents are linked, as Afghan authorities insist, and herald a new campaign by al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants against the foreign military presence and the government of Hamed Karzai.

US officials have sought to play down mounting fears that fugitive fighters who have been lying low along the Afghan-Pakistan border may now be regrouping under the leadership of Islamist warlord, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar,

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced earlier this month that the US was scaling down combat operations in the country and focusing on reconstruction.

Visiting Kabul on May 9, the US deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, echoed this view but offered the assurance that American troops would remain in the country until the security situation had improved.

However, he turned down a request by Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN's special envoy to Afghanistan, for the US to allow peacekeeping operations to be extended beyond Kabul.

"We ourselves have slightly different views of the way to bring security, reconstruction and stability to Afghanistan," he told reporters, stressing that US military-led reconstruction teams were getting busy in the provinces.

As Armitage was leaving Kabul for New Delhi on a regional peace initiative, a loud explosion sent dignitaries ducking for cover. A US embassy spokesman later speculated that a low-flying aircraft caused the bang as it burst the sound barrier, saying, "If it was sabotage, we would have known."

On the day of the Armitage visit, a convoy carrying US and Afghan troops was ambushed at Lalmi, near the town of Khost in southern Afghanistan. One Afghan soldier was killed and a US marine was injured in the attack.

The US retaliated by besieging a compound thought to be housing pro-Taliban insurgents. US helicopter gunships and fighter aircraft brought the siege to an end in the early hours of May 10.

International peacekeepers stationed in Kabul also came under fire during the week. Two Norwegian soldiers were seriously injured when their vehicle was attacked on the road from Kabul to Bagram air base on May 13.

The government signaled its intention to lessen the menace of landmines when black clouds were sent billowing into the skies over eastern Kabul on May 12. Nearly 600 stockpiled anti-personnel and anti-tank mines were blown up in the controlled explosion.

Tempers also flared in northern Kabul when hundreds of drivers and mechanics employed by the government blocked a major road on May 12. They were reacting to reports that they might lose their jobs; many claimed they had not been paid for three months.

A survey released last week by London-based think tank, the International Institute of Strategic Studies, painted a gloomy picture of post-war Afghanistan, with regional warlords mocking central authority, foreign aid failing to get through and poppy fields in full flower.

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