

U.S. and Afghan troops attack Taliban, al-Qaida

GARDEZ, Afghanistan (AP) — In the biggest U.S.-led ground operation of the war, U.S. and Afghan troops backed by U.S. jets Saturday attacked Taliban and al-Qaida forces regrouping in eastern Afghanistan. One American was killed and a number were injured, the Pentagon said.

On Sunday morning, at least nine powerful bombs blasted the Shah-e-Kot mountain range for a third day of strikes, shaking the ground in the foothills 18 miles away and sending up thick black plumes of smoke. B-52s raced across the sky in a constant stream.

Three U.S.-allied Afghan fighters also were killed Saturday, the Pentagon added. Saturday's ground attack, which began at dawn, made little headway in dislodging Taliban and al-Qaida fighters who fought back with artillery, mortars and heavy machine guns, Afghan officials said.

A U.S. defense official said a U.S.-led force of 1,500 Afghan allies, U.S. special forces and troops from the Army's 101st Airborne assault troops assembled for a battle. Canadian troops also participated, but not in large numbers, Canadian military spokesperson Lt. Navy Luc Charron said. Afghan fighters interviewed here said the Americans told them there were about 4,000 al-Qaida and Taliban warriors holed up in the mountains.

More than 80 bombs were dropped Friday and Saturday in

the snowy, mountainous terrain, the U.S. military's Central Command in Florida said. For the first time, warplanes dropped newly developed bombs designed to send suffocating blasts through cave complexes, military officials said. The "thermobaric" bombs were tested in December and officials said in January that they would be rushed to the region for the war.

U.S. forces dropped pamphlets written in Afghanistan's Pashto and Dari languages on the arid plains near the mountain site of the assault, warning that the days of al-Qaida and the Taliban were numbered and urging residents not to support them.

"Stop resisting. End your fight. Otherwise you are finished," the pamphlets declared. They urged residents to inform coalition forces about regrouping al-Qaida and Taliban troops and featured a picture of a Taliban fighter armed with a Kalashnikov sitting on a truck.

Afghan forces broke off the attack in early afternoon and withdrew, possibly to allow U.S. bombers to soften up Taliban and al-Qaida positions overnight. Heavy bombers could be heard flying toward the area late Saturday and B-52 bombers were flying over the area Sunday morning. The Central Command said fighting continued into Saturday night.

Pakistan closed its border to prevent escape by any fleeing al-Qaida or Taliban members. Associated Press reporters saw U.S. military helicopters rush-

Major U.S.-led offensive

The largest reported ground offensive began Saturday against Taliban and al-Qaida strongholds in eastern Afghan province.



SOURCE: ESAI

ing Saturday toward the mountains where the battle was waged.

Ubaidullah Khan, a tribal leader in the nearby Pakistani border of Miran Shah, said the offensive was launched after al-Qaida rebuffed a surrender offer from local Afghan officials.

"We have surrounded al-Qaida and Taliban," said Saif Ullah, a member of a local governing council in Pakhtia province's Gar-

Palestinian shooter opens fire at Israeli army checkpoint

JERUSALEM (AP) — Palestinian gunmen opened fire Sunday on Israeli soldiers and civilian cars at an army checkpoint in the West Bank, killing nine people and wounding two seriously, a paramedic on the scene said.

The dead included seven soldiers and two civilians, the paramedic, Hezi Tsur, told Israel radio.

The attack came just 12 hours after a Palestinian suicide bomber blew himself up in a crowded ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhood of Jerusalem late Saturday, killing nine Israelis, including several children, and wounding more than 30.

The Al Aqsa Brigades, a militia linked to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, claimed responsibility for Saturday's bombing. Israel radio said the militia also claimed responsibility for Sunday's shooting attack.

The militia has said it would take revenge for Israel's assault last week on the West Bank

refugee camps of Balata and Jenin, in which 23 Palestinians were killed over a three-day period.

Sunday's attack took place at an Israeli army roadblock near the Palestinian village of Silwad and the Jewish settlement of Ofra.

Motorist Eli Barashi said he was about 300 yards from the checkpoint at the time.

"I heard shooting and I saw the soldiers firing back to the east. As I stood there somebody was hit and fell and shouted for a medic. He was about five yards from me. One man who came out of a building was also hit. I couldn't be of any use so I turned round and left to get help," Barashi told Israel Radio.

Elsewhere, three soldiers were wounded in a Palestinian shooting attack near the Gaza Strip Sunday morning, the army said.

Israel radio said there were four wounded soldiers. However, a spokesperson for a settlers group said one was killed and three wounded.

The radio said the shooting was on the road that runs along the Israeli side of the fence between the Gaza Strip and southern Israel.

Early Sunday, Israeli helicopters fired four mis-

siles at Palestinian Authority headquarters in a small factory in Bethlehem. The Israeli military said the strike was retaliation for the Jerusalem bombing.

The thunderous blast from the suicide bomber shook downtown Jerusalem and sent flames shooting into the air from a car that caught fire splattered the stone wall in front of the Israel seminary, where up to 1,000 Jews study every Saturday evening.

The bomber entered the Shearim neighborhood in Jerusalem, "approached a group of people (and detonated) an explosive on his body," Jerusalem police chief Dore Gold said.

Besides the bomber, a 10-year-old child and several children, police said.

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Palestinian militants had vowed to attack Israel's military stormed into two West Bank refugee camps over the past three days. As many as 23 Palestinians — including gunmen, militants and civilians — have been killed in the attacks since Thursday.

Israeli troops spent three days searching for militants and weapons in the Balata refugee camp on the edge of Nablus in the West Bank. They pulled out before daybreak Sunday, military said.

Palestinian security sources said a Jerusalem bomber was Mohammed Darwish, 20, a member of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. They said he came from the Dheish camp near Bethlehem.

At the entrance to Dheish camp, hundreds of Palestinians staged an impromptu protest chanting, "revenge, revenge," and firing tear gas into the air.

"The state of Israel knows how to defend the people of Israel, and will do so."

— Dore Gold, Israeli government spokesperson

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