

Six British soldiers killed by explosion in southern Afghanistan

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The UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) has confirmed that six soldiers are missing, believed dead, after an explosive device hit their armoured vehicle Tuesday in southern Afghanistan.

Five of the soldiers are from the 3rd Battalion, Yorkshire Regiment, and one is from the 1st Battalion, Duke of Lancaster's Regiment. They were on patrol when their Warrior armoured vehicle was struck in Helmand province. The six soldiers had been in Afghanistan for less than a month, having flown out of the UK on Valentine's Day.

If confirmed, the incident will constitute the single largest loss of life in combat suffered by British troops in Afghanistan since the US-led invasion of the country in 2001. Five British soldiers died in a blast from an improvised explosive device in the summer of 2009.

The biggest loss of UK troops resulted from the 2006 crash of an RAF Nimrod plane shortly after mid-air refuelling. That accident killed 14 personnel.

Tuesday's troop deaths bring the death toll of British soldiers in Afghanistan to 404.

The six soldiers had been travelling as part of a two-Warrior patrol when their vehicle was hit at a road junction. The explosion was caused by either a roadside bomb or a "legacy mine" left over from the Soviet-era occupation. The BBC's Orla Guerin, in Kabul, said there had to have been a "massive explosion" to inflict so much damage on such a "robust and heavily protected vehicle."

The area around the explosion is sparsely populated and particularly unstable.

British political and military officials made empty and well-rehearsed statements to the media. Prime Minister David Cameron said the news was a "reminder of the huge price that we are paying for the work we are doing in Afghanistan and the sacrifice that

our troops have made and continue to make."

Labour Party leader Ed Miliband said the armed forces were "serving with bravery and courage and we owe them all a huge debt of gratitude."

The basic message—that nothing would change—was given by Defence Secretary Philip Hammond, who insisted that "those responsible for this incident... will ultimately fail to derail a mission that is protecting our national security at home and making real progress in Helmand province."

"This will not shake our resolve to see through the mission," he added.

Before 3,300 military personnel from 16 Air Assault Brigade were sent to Helmand province in 2006, just five UK troops had been killed in Afghanistan since the 2001 invasion.

In 2006, 39 British troops were killed, the following year 42. In the ensuing three years, which saw a US military "surge" of 30,000 extra combat troops and some of the fiercest fighting, fatalities rose sharply, first to 51, then 108, and then 103. Last year, the figure dropped to 46. Ten British soldiers have been killed so far this year.

The number of British troops wounded in Afghanistan since 2006 stands at more than 5,000, with more than 10 percent suffering serious or very serious injuries. An estimated 300 UK troops have had amputations in the past decade, and 3,000 more need help with serious long-term injuries.

The MoD says it does not have a clear record of how many wounded personnel there were before 2006.

There are currently 9,500 British troops in Afghanistan.

Since 2001, a total of 2,914 foreign soldiers have been killed in the country. The majority of these have been Americans, with 1,909 soldiers killed to date and

over 14,000 injured.

Twenty-eight countries have lost troops in Afghanistan, with Canada, which has lost 158, the only other country to have suffered more than 100 casualties.

This bloody total pales in comparison to the rising death toll of Afghan civilians. According to a recent UN report, which relied on understated figures that do not take into consideration the NATO/US practice of routinely labelling Afghan fatalities as “insurgents,” the civilian death toll reached a record high last year with 3,021 deaths. This was the fifth consecutive recorded rise of civilian deaths. A further 4,507 civilians were wounded.

According to UN estimates, almost 10,000 civilians died between 2006 and 2010.

The decade-long occupation careers from one bloody debacle to the next. In its effort to extricate itself from a deeply unpopular and unsustainable war, the Obama administration has set great store by its stooge Afghan security forces to facilitate a US withdrawal from the country. But these supposed allies are increasingly turning on the occupation forces, with two more US soldiers shot dead in Kandahar province this month by Afghan soldiers and an Afghan civilian instructor.

Altogether, Afghan troops have killed 70 American soldiers in 46 incidents since 2007, half of them since President Barack Obama first ordered the escalation of the US war effort in the spring of 2009. According to US military investigations, the majority of these attacks were by individual soldiers enraged by the conduct of US forces, not Taliban infiltrators.

In January, President Nicolas Sarkozy threatened to withdraw all French forces from Afghanistan after four of its troops were killed by an Afghan soldier at a base east of Kabul.

The most recent shootings by uniformed Afghans were provoked by last months’ burning of copies of the Koran by US troops. Mass protests at US and NATO facilities throughout Afghanistan took place following the Koran burnings at Bagram Air Base.



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