

Beat: Politics

Friendly fire kills 5 American troops during clash with Taliban

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USPA News - Five American service members were killed in southern Afghanistan on Monday when they were hit by a friendly-fire air strike after clashing with insurgents, making it one of the deadliest instances of friendly fire in the decade-long war, Afghan and U.S. officials said on Tuesday. The incident happened on Monday evening when troops belonging to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) were carrying out security operations in Arghandab district of southern Zabul province. As their operations drew to a close, they were ambushed by Taliban fighters.

"Mujahideen (Muslim fighters) last night surprised the foot patrol of the foreign forces in the center of Arghandab district," Taliban spokesman Qari Yousuf said. "Shortly afterwards, the enemy helicopter gunships were called in to come to the assistance of the enemy being attacked by the Mujahideen. The helicopters flew over the area and bombed the site, taking their own puppets for Mujahideen." Afghan officials also said the foreign troops were hit by an ISAF airstrike after calling for air support, though a military source said the aircraft that carried out the airstrike was a U.S. Air Force B-1 strategic bomber. In Washington, Pentagon Press Secretary Rear Adm. John Kirby confirmed five American troops were killed during a security operation in southern Afghanistan. "Investigators are looking into the likelihood that friendly fire was the cause," he said. "Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of these fallen." The White House said the Pentagon was carrying out an investigation into the deaths of the five American service members but provided no additional information about the circumstances surrounding the incident. "Our hearts are heavy over this loss, and our thoughts and prayers are with the families of the fallen," said U.S. National Security Council spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden. Monday's deaths raise the number of coalition troops killed in Afghanistan so far this year to 40, according to official figures. A total of 160 ISAF troops were killed in Afghanistan in 2013, down from 402 fatalities in 2012 and 566 in 2011. A majority of the fallen troops were American and were killed in the country's south, which is plagued by IED attacks on troops and civilians. There are currently more than 50,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, including some 32,800 U.S. troops and 5,200 British service members. Most foreign troops are scheduled to leave the war-torn country by the end of the year, but a security deal expected to be signed by Afghanistan's next president will likely keep American troops in the country until the end of 2016.

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