

## 200 NATO Troops Die in Afghanistan This Year

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Global Research, May 17, 2010

[AFP](#) 17 May 2010

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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KABUL — The deaths of 200 NATO soldiers in 2010 marked the deadliest January to mid-May in the nearly nine-year Afghan war, as the Taliban fight escalates and the West pours thousands more troops into battle.

The grim milestone was recorded by an AFP tally based on the independent icasualties website, after a NATO convoy drove over a roadside bomb, killing two Italian soldiers in northwestern Afghanistan on Monday.

Two other Italians were seriously wounded, the Italian government said.

They were in a vehicle that was struck by a roadside bomb, the weapon of choice of Taliban-led insurgents fighting the Western-backed Afghan government and around 130,000 US-led foreign troops in the country.

Italy is currently the fifth largest contributor of troops to the NATO force in Afghanistan, with 3,300 troops in the International Security Assistance Force and heads the western regional command headquartered in Herat.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi expressed his condolences for the deaths but underscored his commitment to keeping troops in Afghanistan, where 23 Italian soldiers and one diplomat have died since the war began.

"The mission in Afghanistan to stabilise and pacify a strategic region is of fundamental importance" he said in a statement.

From January to end-May 2009, 119 NATO soldiers died in Afghanistan. Overall 520 NATO died in 2009, the deadliest year so far for US-led foreign troops since the 2001 US-led invasion brought down the Taliban regime.

Since summer 2009, one to two NATO soldiers have died on average each day. The United States and its NATO allies are increasing to 150,000 their military deployment. About two thirds of the troops are American.

The United States believes the "surge" of troops can wrest the initiative from the Taliban in key population centres and allow American forces to start withdrawing from the unpopular and costly conflict next year.

Commanders have long warned that an influx of new troops would lead to an increase in military fatalities, particularly when the fighting season peaks during the warmer summer months.

The first major US-led offensive of the new strategy encountered stiff resistance in Marjah, part of the poppy-growing belt of southern province Helmand, and its achievements have been questioned in the US press.

According to a poll carried out by London-based think tank, the International Council on Security and Development, 61 percent of Afghans feel more negative about NATO forces than before the Marjah offensive.

Three suicide bombers launched a coordinated assault on a police headquarters in Kandahar overnight, damaging the compound and sparking a gun battle, Afghan police said.

The attack underscored the growing threat posed by the Taliban in Kandahar, their spiritual home and regarded as the country's most important battleground.

The compound had most of its windows broken and was littered with bullets, blood and the suicide attackers' body parts, an AFP reporter said.

The Taliban, spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi said, claimed responsibility for the attack.

The Afghan interior ministry said three policemen were wounded.

Taliban-led militants have stepped up coordinated gun and suicide bomb assaults on the government as their insurgency gathers pace.

In eastern Afghanistan, another Taliban stronghold, militants ambushed and killed a pro-government cleric along with his brother and his driver in Kunar province, officials said.

Rehman Gul was a former anti-Soviet resistance commander and prominent tribal elder in the district of Chapa Dara.

He played a mediator's role in tribal disputes in the district and was respected by the community, provincial police chief Khalilullah Ziyayee said.

Speaking to AFP, Ziyayee blamed Sunday's attack on "enemies of Afghanistan," a term often used to refer to Taliban insurgents.

Three explosions in southern Afghanistan on Sunday killed eight civilians including three children and two policemen, the interior ministry said.

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