

Supply Blockade Enters 7th Day as NATO Tankers Sabotaged Once Again

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ISLAMABAD, Oct. 6 (Xinhua) — Dozens of NATO supply oil tankers were sabotaged to ashes Wednesday in southwest Pakistan, as the imposed blockade of vital supplies to U.S.-led multinational forces in Afghanistan entered the 7th day, amid heightening tension between Washington and Islamabad.

At least one driver was killed as some 20 NATO oil tankers were attacked by some unknown gunmen early Wednesday morning near Quetta, a city in southwest Pakistan.

It was the fourth terrorist attack since the first one on Friday that burnt over 30 NATO oil tankers in Shikarpur in southern Sindh province. Two tankers were destroyed in Balochistan the same day. Another two dozens of tankers were set ablaze early Monday morning in the garrison city of Rawalpindi near Pakistani capital Islamabad.

Thousands of NATO supply oil tankers and container trucks are lined up vulnerable to terrorist attacks in different parts of Pakistan. The country blocked these convoys from entering into Afghanistan on Friday following the violation of Pakistani airspace a day earlier by NATO helicopters that left three Pakistani paramilitary troops dead at a checkpoint near Pakistan-Afghanistan border in the northwest.

“There is no time frame,” Pakistani Foreign Office spokesman Abdul Basit told Xinhua in an exclusive interview on Tuesday regarding the blockade of supplies to over 140,000 multinational NATO troops fighting insurgency in Afghanistan since the ouster of Taliban government in 2001.

Outlawed Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed the responsibility of Shikarpur and Rawalpindi attacks on the NATO trucks, promising more attacks in retaliation to violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty by NATO gunship helicopters.

Pakistani Taliban spokesman Azam Tariq in a telephone call to media on Saturday said, “We will never allow a supply line which is taking ammunition for NATO forces to be used against the Afghan Taliban.”

Despite Pentagon’s Tuesday statement that the blockade “has not in any way adversely impacted our ability to supply our forces,” media reports suggested that tension mounts between Islamabad and Washington over the issues amid hopes that it would be resolved soon.

The situation would damage U.S. and NATO’s strategic relations with Pakistan, a frontline

ally in the U.S.-led war on terror, which has been fast spreading into Pakistan from Afghanistan during the past few years.

"We have been given indications that we are making progress on that front and hope to have the gate (at Torkham border) reopened as soon as possible," Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell said.

NATO promised to present an investigation report within 24 hours on violation of Pakistani airspace and had already offered condolences and an apology on killing of Pakistani troops in incursions.

"Pakistan has communicated very clearly and explicitly to all friends and allies that such incursions are unacceptable," Basit told Xinhua, adding "we'll not bear them under any circumstances."

The coalition forces' limited supplies are being airlifted via a leased airstrip in Manas, Kyrgyzstan and shipped through northern supply routes that are expensive and would turn far more difficult in the approaching freezing winter of Central Asia.

"We stopped supplies for security reasons," Basit said, adding "and as soon as these concerns are addressed supply will be restored."

On the other side, a new White House assessment unveiled by U.S. media concludes that Pakistan has been unwilling to aggressively pursue Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban militants in its North Waziristan tribal area, making the situation more complex.

Despite the complicated situation, local analysts still see a ray of hope at the end of the tunnel regarding restoration of NATO supplies soon. However, more saboteurs are expected amid Taliban threats as insecure NATO trucks are piling up in the border area, which are vulnerable to terrorist attacks.

NATO contracted trucks carry over 70 percent of an "all kinds" of "customs inspection and tax free" supplies and 40 percent of its oil needs from the southern port city of Karachi to Afghanistan. They enter Afghanistan from two points including Chaman in the southwest Balochistan and Torkham in the northwest Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, both insurgency-plagued provinces.

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