

Plane of U.S. joint chiefs of staff hit by rocket fire in Afghanistan; general safe

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Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, left, and Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey confer on Capitol Hill in Washington prior to testifying, in this April 19, 2012 file photo. Dempsey was not injured when militants fired rockets into a U.S. base in Afghanistan and damaged his plane on the ground.

KABUL, Afghanistan — Militants fired rockets into a U.S. base in Afghanistan and damaged the plane of the chairman of the U.S. joint chiefs of staff while he was on a visit, but the general was not near the aircraft, a spokesman for the U.S.-led military coalition said Tuesday.

The rocket strike that hit the plane of U.S. Army Gen. Martin Dempsey was yet another propaganda coup for the Taliban after they claimed to have shot down a U.S. helicopter last week.

It also followed a string of disturbing killings of U.S. military trainers by their Afghan partners or militants dressed in Afghan uniform. Such attacks killed 10 Americans in the last two weeks alone.

Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for the attack, which took place Monday

night at the Bagram Air Field outside Kabul, saying Dempsey's plane was targeted by insurgents "using exact information" about where it would be.

Two maintenance workers were slightly injured by shrapnel from the two rockets fired into, coalition spokesman Jamie Graybeal said.

Dempsey "was nowhere near" the plane when the rockets hit near where the aircraft was parked, the spokesman added.

Dempsey had finished his mission in Afghanistan and had left by Tuesday morning on a different plane, said Graybeal. A helicopter on the base was also damaged in the attack, according to NATO.

Graybeal cast doubt on the idea that Dempsey's plane may have been hit by any precision attack. He said that insurgent rocket and mortar attacks are "not infrequent" at Bagram and that such fire most often comes from so far away that it's virtually impossible to hit specific targets.

Bagram is a sprawling complex about an hour's drive north of Kabul that usually serves as the first point of entrance for U.S. officials visiting the country. It is the hub for military operations in the east of the country and the largest U.S. base in Afghanistan.

Dempsey was in Afghanistan to discuss the state of the war after a particularly deadly few weeks for Americans in the more than 10-year-old war as international forces begin drawing down.

He and the chief of U.S. Central Command, Marine Gen. James R. Mattis, met with NATO and U.S. Afghan commander Gen. John Allen in Kabul and also with a number of senior Afghan and coalition leaders.

Among the topics was the escalating number of "insider attacks" in which Afghan police or soldiers or militants dressed in Afghan uniform turn their guns on coalition military trainers. Once an anomaly, such attacks have been climbing in recent months. There have been 32 such attacks so far this year, up from 21 for all of 2011, according to NATO.

Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar last week said the insider killings were the result of an insurgent campaign of infiltration, though NATO has said it's too early to tell if the attacks were related to the insurgency of caused by personal disputes turned deadly.

The Taliban also claimed to have shot down a U.S. military helicopter that crashed during a firefight with

insurgents in a remote area of southern Afghanistan on Thursday, killing seven Americans and four Afghans on board in one of the deadliest air disasters of the war.

U.S. officials, however, said initial reports were that enemy fire was not involved in the crash.

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