**Militants Kill 9 Afghan Aid Workers in Night Time Attack**

Unidentified militants shot and killed nine Afghan employees of a Czech-backed aid group, People in Need, in an attack early today in Afghanistan's northern Balkh province, government officials said.  
  
Aid workers have faced increasing attacks in Afghanistan as foreign troops have withdrawn and security has deteriorated, making the country one of the most dangerous for aid groups.  
Government officials blamed the Taliban for the attack, about 50 miles (80 km) south of the provincial capital.  
  
"They shot dead nine people, including a woman," said Mohammad Daud Naemi, a spokesman for the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development.

Five employees, two drivers and two guards were killed in the attack that started shortly after 1 a.m., he added.  
  
In a statement, People in Need said its staff had worked in the area since 2002, and it was suspending all operations in Afghanistan.  
  
The office of the provincial governor also blamed the Taliban and said it was investigating the incident.

The Taliban said it was looking into the details of the attack and could not immediately comment.  
  
The militant Islamist group has been fighting to topple the internationally backed government after being ousted from power by a U.S. led invasion in 2001.  
  
As many as 57 aid workers were killed last year, the United Nations says. Most have been Afghan staff members, who work in the field and face a greater risk of kidnappings and killing.  
In April, 19 Afghan de-miners were freed two days after being abducted by militants while doing a survey in the eastern region.  
  
They were luckier than five aid workers of Save the Children, who were abducted in March, and found dead more than a month later in central Uruzgan province.

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