

Taleban Air Offensive Reported Near Kabul

Fighting Follows Attack on Opposition Chief

Reuters

KABUL — The Taleban has begun a major offensive north of the capital after suicide bombers tried to kill the movement's key military opponent, anti-Taleban sources said Tuesday.

The Taleban militia, which has denied any link with the attack Sunday on the guerrilla commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, had no immediate comment on the offensive — which followed several days of heavy clashes with Mr. Massoud's forces in the same area.

But with the fate of Mr. Massoud still unclear, the sound of fighting north of Kabul could be heard clearly in the city on Tuesday.

Opposition sources with Mr. Massoud's forces said the Taleban offensive was concentrating on two fronts leading to his stronghold and birthplace in the Panjshir Valley, 120 kilometers (80 miles) north of Kabul.

Kabul residents could hear the roar of Taleban jet fighters making regular runs north of Kabul and the explosions of artillery shells. The fighters were left behind by the Soviet forces that Mr. Massoud fought in the 1980s.

Opposition spokesmen said Mr. Massoud survived an assassination attempt on Sunday by two Arab suicide bombers pretending to be journalists and was recovering from "superficial" injuries in neighboring Tajikistan.

Ahmed Wali Massoud, Mr. Massoud's brother and spokesman in London, was quoted Tuesday on CNN saying "our latest information is that he's in a stable condition."

He said he had received word that Mr. Massoud was in Tajikistan.

"Now he can communicate, but of course not frequently," Mr. Massoud's brother said. "He can communicate from time to time. He's in a much, much better situation right now."

The Itar-Tass news agency of Russia and the BBC quoted sources in central Asia saying that the 48-year-old veteran commander had been killed by the blast.

"Seriously, he has not died, but he is in the hospital," an opposition official, Sayed Najibullah Hashimi, said Tuesday from the northeastern town of Faizabad, the formal opposition capital.

Mr. Hashimi repeated that the assassination attempt against Mr. Massoud was the work of the Taleban and the Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden, who lives under Taleban protection in an unknown location in Afghanistan.

The Taleban, which forced Mr. Massoud from Kabul in 1996, denied involvement in the attack on him, but he is

the only opposition commander the hard-line Islamic movement has failed to crush in its drive for control of Afghanistan.

■ Massoud Is a Key Figure

Molly Moore of *The Washington Post* reported earlier from Istanbul:

The death or serious injury of the tall, gaunt Mr. Massoud could dramatically alter the future of the war-ravaged and economically devastated country. For the past five years, Mr. Massoud has orchestrated both the military battles and the political alliances of former foes now fighting together against the Taleban, which controls the vast majority of Afghanistan.

Mr. Massoud was one of the most successful of the young Islamic guerrilla leaders who fought for 10 years — with money and weapons supplied by the Central Intelligence Agency — to drive Soviet occupation troops out of Afghanistan.

When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, Mr. Massoud became defense minister in a coalition government that quickly disintegrated into warring factions, fighting each other for control of Kabul and leaving the city in ruins.

After the Taleban gradually began seizing control of parts of Afghanistan in 1994 and captured Kabul in 1996, Mr. Massoud persuaded those same factions to form a military alliance against the Taleban.

In recent years, Mr. Massoud had received weapons and financing from his old enemy, Moscow, which saw him as the only buffer between the Taleban and the unstable government of Tajikistan, the former Soviet republic that abuts Afghanistan.

Mr. Massoud's associates agreed on details of how the attack unfolded.

Two Arab men holding Belgian passports and identifying themselves as journalists for an Arab news agency arrived at Mr. Massoud's battlefield headquarters in Khodja Bahaaddin for an interview after touring nearby provinces.

Minutes after the interview began, they detonated a bomb hidden in their video camera or strapped to one of their bodies, according to Mr. Massoud's associates.

Mr. Massoud's official spokesman and close aide, Assem Suhail, was killed in the explosion, and the Afghan ambassador to India, Massoud Khalili, who was visiting Mr. Massoud, was wounded. One of the attackers died in the blast and Mr. Massoud's guards shot and killed the other, according to Mr. Massoud's associates.