

At about 1245hrs local time on Tuesday 15 December, in the Sangin Wadi, about 1800 metres to the east of Sangin District Centre's main Bazaar area a joint patrol of British troops from 3 RIFLES and Afghan troops had set up a vehicle check-point.

The joint patrol was made up of 4 Afghan National Army soldiers and 15 British soldiers from 3 RIFLES with an interpreter. The Afghan soldiers are commanded by Colonel Wadood and 3 RIFLES by Lt Col Nick Kitson. The two men live and work together from a forward operating base (FOB JACKSON) just to the north of Sangin DC, where their Headquarters are alongside one another.

The check-point was set up as part of the ongoing security operations which the local Afghan Army and Police, supported by 3 RIFLES, have been conducting to protect people in the centre of Sangin DC from insurgent attacks.

A motorcycle carrying two men came towards the check-point and drove straight into it, the insurgents' bombs exploding among the soldiers. Two Afghan soldiers and two British soldiers were killed and two other Afghan soldiers seriously injured.

Afghan soldiers arriving at the scene extracted their own dead and wounded in one of their vehicles to FOB JACKSON where they were evacuated by a US casevac helicopter to the hospital at Camp Bastion. In minutes a British Chinook medical evacuation helicopter arrived at the scene. It landed close to the incident under small arms and rocket-propelled grenade fire, and evacuated the British casualties, who tragically were pronounced dead shortly after. They were later named as Lance Corporal David Kirkness and Rifleman James Brown, and their eulogies are published below.

The UK MoD says that it is too early to know for sure, and the incident will be subject to an investigation, but initial indications are that the motorcycle was carrying not one but two suicide bombers – reports from the scene suggest there was a double explosion. It is thought the bombers were trying to get in to Sangin DC to attack the people there, possibly with one bomber killing himself and the other waiting to attack security forces or civilians in the aftermath. It seems that the bombers, on realizing they wouldn't get to the Bazaar because of the vehicle check-point they hadn't been expecting, blew themselves up among the soldiers.

Colonel Wadood and Lt Col Kitson went out together among the people in the Sangin DC Bazaar the following day. Colonel Wadood took the opportunity to talk to as many people as possible, including a large group of local people that formed at one point, telling them: "The suicide bombers were making their way here, to the Bazaar. Brave ISAF soldiers and Afghan Warriors died defending the safety of the Sangin people and this Bazaar."

He also stressed the need for the local people to go on taking greater ownership of their own security

"Colonel Wadood and I work very closely and we both felt strongly the need to make sure the

people of Sangin DC understand the sacrifices being made by Afghan and British soldiers to protect them, and to reassure them we will not be intimidated by such acts. We feel deeply the loss of our comrades, Afghan and British alike, but had it not been for their courage and bravery the potential loss of civilian lives in the heart of the Sangin community can only be guessed at," said Nick Kitson later.

Sangin District Centre is one of the protected communities in central Helmand alongside Gereshk, Musa Qualeh, Nad-e-Ali and Lashkar Gah where local people have been able to live lives protected from insurgent intimidation and violence and with their own security forces, the Afghan Police and Army, increasingly taking the lead. It is in these centres that the economies are recovering and the international investment in reconstruction and redevelopment is under way.

Two years ago, the main Bazaar street in Sangin DC was a dusty main street with few shops open and for ISAF and local security forces was passable only in a heavily armoured vehicle. Today it has over 200 stalls open daily, a metalled road, drainage, and Afghan Police and Army as well as ISAF troops walking about freely.

Afghan and British soldiers have recently been expanding the area under Afghan government control with a series of operations (known as Operation Ghartse Ghadmahe, reported on separately in the blog ) pushing deeper in to the Green Zone (the irrigated and heavily vegetated areas astride the Helmand River) and other areas around Sangin DC to expel insurgents from areas from which they previously. The soldiers have built new check-points and patrol bases to demonstrate to locals as signs of Afghan Government and ISAF commitment to their security.

This blog draws upon material supplied by the UK MoD.