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From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
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From: OpsNewsTicker
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Subject: U.S. Erred in Deadly Attack: New Report on Pakistan Airstrike That Killed 24 Acknowledges U.S. Culpability (WSJ)

WASHINGTON—The U.S. is poised to concede for the first time that it bears significant responsibility for last month's American airstrike that killed 24 Pakistani troops, U.S. officials said, an admission that is expected to embarrass the American military but points to a way out of the deepening mistrust between the two countries.

Pakistani Islamic groups participated in a rally in Lahore on Sunday against the U.S. and India and in support of the Pakistani military.

A military investigation has found that U.S. and Afghan commandos incorrectly concluded there were no Pakistani forces in the Afghan border area where the coalition was conducting an operation on Nov. 26, according to U.S. officials familiar with the report. That assessment cleared the way for an airstrike that devastated Pakistani positions.

After the initial strike, the U.S. compounded its mistake by providing inaccurate data to a Pakistani military representative at a border-coordination center, missing an opportunity to stop the fighting, these people said.

The new report's conclusions uphold key portions of Pakistan's version of events. It also conflicts with some early U.S. accounts, which said Pakistanis gave an all-clear that opened the way for the most deadly friendly-fire incident of the 10-year Afghanistan war.

The earlier U.S. accounts were based on preliminary and incomplete debriefings of service members involved in the incident, officials said, while the complete investigation is based on computer records, radio reports and other documentation. U.S. military investigators were denied access to Pakistani officials, including the representative at the border center, officials have said.

The investigation, described by U.S. military officials familiar with the findings, is due to be presented Friday to U.S. defense leaders.

"The overarching issue that surrounds this incident is a lack of trust" between U.S. and Pakistan that led to the incident, a military official said.

The attack infuriated Pakistanis and prompted Islamabad to close the Afghan-Pakistan border to military supply convoys. U.S. officials hope the results of the investigation will help ease tensions and lead to the reopening of border crossings as early as next week.

A key question is how the findings will be received by Pakistanis, who have been demanding a formal U.S. apology. Aides to President Barack Obama in the days after the incident considered having him transmit videotaped condolences but opted to wait for the results of the investigation.

Such a step could be politically difficult by opening the president up to charges that he isn't standing firmly enough behind the U.S. military. Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney has frequently criticized what he calls Mr. Obama's practice of apologizing for America.

Pakistani officials directly involved in discussing the incident with the U.S. said they have yet to see the contents of the U.S. investigation and stood by their account of the events.

U.S. officials said mistakes were made on both sides.

Military officials said North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces should inform the Pakistanis about planned operations near the border. But NATO officials told investigators they believed Pakistanis had tipped off insurgents about previous missions. That prompted them to withhold information about the Nov. 26 U.S.-Afghan operation in the Mohmand tribal region, a lawless border area that abuts Afghanistan's Kunar province. The Pakistanis, the military official said, had meanwhile withheld information about the location of its border posts. NATO officials told investigators that insurgents sometimes operate from unmanned Pakistani military outposts, according to those familiar with the report.

The report says the 150-man U.S.-Afghan commando team came under attack from positions along a ridgeline. They requested a show of force by an F-15 fighter jet and AC-130 gunship, which launched warning flares toward the positions high above the commandos, the report concludes.

The ground forces asked NATO for a report on the area. "We are not tracking any pak mil in the area," they were told in a radio transmission. The ground forces took that to mean there was no Pakistani military there, according to a military official familiar with the report.

That assessment was then typed into a electronic "chat room" that was following the firefight, causing U.S. officials to temporarily stop asking the Pakistani military whether they had forces in the area, the official said.

A second error came later in the firefight, when a U.S. military service member in eastern Afghanistan gave general coordinates for the fight to Pakistani representatives in a border-control center, which is also staffed by NATO and Afghan officials. The U.S. military in eastern Afghanistan had a practice of providing the Pakistanis with general, not specific, locations.

The U.S. report found that the U.S.-Afghan commando team on the ground reported the correct coordinates to their supervisors. Those coordinates were accurately relayed to the helicopters that conducted the strikes.

But according to the new U.S. account, a serviceman talking to the border-control center, attempting to make the coordinates more specific for the Pakistanis by pairing them with a map of the political border, applied an incorrect electronic overlay on his computer. That led the Pakistanis to conclude that the fight was about 9 miles from its true location.

That generally matches the account of Pakistani officials, who say their representative at the border center repeatedly told his NATO counterparts that their information was incomplete or inaccurate, and told them that he needed more detailed information before he could verify whether Pakistani troops were in the area.

Viewing the incorrect information, the representative couldn't tell that the U.S. helicopters were firing on Pakistani troops.

In the days after the incident, U.S. officials cast doubt on Pakistani claims that incorrect coordinates were

relayed to the border-control center. U.S. officials insisted that the helicopter strike began only after the Pakistani representative there gave them an all-clear.

But the U.S. military's report acknowledges conclusively that the location given to the Pakistani representative were off by nearly nine miles.

Pakistani officials have denied that their troops on the ridge opened fire first on the U.S. and Afghan commandos.

According to a senior Pakistani official, NATO's top officer at the border-coordination center immediately acknowledged what happened, and repeatedly apologized to the Pakistani representative there "for providing wrong information."

A former U.S. official confirmed that the NATO officer apologized to the Pakistani representative. Officials didn't divulge the nationality of the NATO officer.

The U.S. government, however, has so far refused to issue an apology, one of Pakistan's demands. Washington has repeatedly expressed its condolences for the loss of Pakistani life.

U.S. military officials, while conceding the American mistakes, emphasized that the Pakistanis should have known from the fighter jets and gunships that they were not firing on insurgents.

"It's hard to mistake these units for insurgents," said a U.S. official. "One of the gaps in this investigation is we don't know why they came under fire by the Pakistani military."

In retaliation for the killing, Pakistan closed its border with Afghanistan. The closure worries U.S. military commanders because they rely heavily on those crossings to bring in fuel, ammunition and other supplies needed by troops fighting in Afghanistan.

In the negotiations over reopening the border, the Pakistanis have asked the U.S. to pay customary cross-border transit fees in advance. Pakistanis have complained in the past about delays in payments. Islamabad also wants the U.S. to do more to help in managing the growing number of Afghan refugees on the border.

Pakistan also kicked the Central Intelligence Agency out of a base that the spy agency had long used as a launching pad for drone strikes against militant targets in Pakistani tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. Officials said it was unlikely Islamabad would allow the CIA to return to the Shamsi air base. Officials said the CIA no longer needs the base because it has moved its drones to Afghan air fields.

Still, the breakdown in relations with Pakistan appears to have had a chilling effect on the drone program, at least temporarily. The CIA hasn't conducted strikes in Pakistan since the border incident, reflecting U.S. concerns about taking actions that could exacerbate tensions. Pakistani officials believe they have an understanding with U.S. officials to halt the strikes until relations have improved.

Pakistan turned down a U.S. offer to take part in the U.S. military investigation, underlining the breakdown in relations.

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