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Kabul Protests U.S. Drug-Running Allegations

By Maria Abi-Habib

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KABUL - The U.S. military's blacklisting of Afghanistan's largest private airline on allegations that it is trafficking opiates has sparked a diplomatic crisis with Kabul, with the Afghan government defending the airline, demanding to see proof of any wrongdoing and raising a rare threat of legal action.

The airline, Kam Air, also denied the allegations, reported by The Wall Street Journal on Friday, and said it has asked the U.S. military to show it the evidence. In Tajikistan, through which U.S. military officials say the drugs are allegedly smuggled by Kam Air, officials also protested.

On Tuesday, spokesmen for Central Command referred questions to the U.S.-led military coalition in Afghanistan, which declined to comment. The U.S. Embassy in Kabul also declined to comment.

Earlier this month, the U.S. military's Central Command barred Kam Air from bidding on U.S. military contracts, acting on the results of an investigation by Task Force 2010, the anti-corruption unit of the U.S.-led coalition force in Afghanistan. U.S. Army Maj-Gen. Richard Longo, the force's commander, declined to make public the details of the evidence it passed to Centcom, saying they are classified.

U.S. officials familiar with the probe say the investigation looked into the alleged use of Kam Air to smuggle opium "in bulk" around Afghanistan and to Central Asia. The airline's only civilian route to Central Asia is a flight between Kabul and Dushanbe, the Tajik capital.

Afghanistan accounts for some 90% of the world's illicit opiates, according to United Nations statistics, with Tajikistan one of the main smuggling routes to markets in Russia and Europe.

The Afghan government and Kam Air learned about the blacklisting during inquiries from the Journal.

Afghanistan's council of ministers, which met to discuss the Journal report this week, called the U.S. allegations against Kam Air "an irresponsible act" and called on U.S. authorities to share the information they have on the matter with Kabul.

"If the allegations are not proved, the Afghan government will ask for legal restitution [to restore the airline's] prestige and compensation of any loss resulting from the announcement against Kam Air," the council said in a public statement. The statement didn't make clear how the government would seek restitution.

The U.S. allegations come at a sensitive time for the Afghan government, as its flagship state-run carrier, Ariana Afghan Airlines, is in merger discussions with Kam Air, according to people familiar with both parties. The new entity could see Kam Air assume managerial responsibilities, according to the parties.

In a statement on Tuesday, Kam Air said it was "shocked" by the U.S. allegations.

"In our 10-year history, we have carried some six million passengers domestically and regionally, without a single reported incident of drug trafficking—however small. Few airlines—even in the U.S.—can boast such a record," the statement said. The allegations of opium smuggling may be "directly related to the fierce competition under way between Kam Air, as the leading Afghan carrier, and international contractors," the airline added.

Officials in Tajikistan also complained about the U.S. move. "This statement by the U.S. military undermines not only Kam Air's authority, it also undermines Tajikistan's international prestige," Mahmadyusuf Shodiyev, a spokesman for Dushanbe International Airport, told the local Asia-Plus news agency Tuesday.

The Afghan government says the damage caused to Kam Air's reputation will impact Afghanistan's already weak economy. Even Afghan President Hamid Karzai uses the airline for some diplomatic trips, a presidential spokesman said.

"We are taking this issue very seriously and will definitely take action if we find that Kam Air is smuggling drugs. But that's why the ministers' meeting is requesting the U.S. to share its evidence," said Mr. Karzai's spokesman, Aimal Faizi. "If the Afghan government is supposed to take action, the U.S. should have shared this report with us before speaking to the media."

Mr. Faizi added that the country's Ministry of Interior is investigating the issue and airport security, while the ministries of foreign affairs and transportation are following up on the allegations with the U.S. Embassy and military in Kabul.

Although Kam Air said in its statement that it would "fight for our good name and the future of Afghan aviation," a lawyer for the airline said no legal action was being planned at this point.

"Kam Air is counting on American standards of fair play, transparency and due process to be exercised by the U.S. government authorities in this case," said the attorney, Ward Scott. "We are simply seeking an opportunity to present the facts and address these allegations and are hopeful this will promptly result in a removal of the ... ban."