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AP News

War papers leak shock Afghanistan, upset Pakistan

Afghan govt: Leaked war papers stress need to shutter terrorist havens outside Afghanistan

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July 26, 2010

Clearly pointing a finger at Pakistan, the Afghan government said Monday that the 91,000 leaked U.S. military documents verify Afghanistan's long-held view that the war won't end until terrorist sanctuaries in neighboring nations are shut down.

In Islamabad, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence agency lashed out against the trove of leaked papers that alleged close connections between it and the Taliban militants who are fighting U.S., Afghan and NATO troops in Afghanistan. The ISI called the allegations, which have been repeated for years, unsubstantiated.

Pakistan's government described the documents as "misplaced, skewed and contrary to the factual position on the ground."

"The people of Pakistan and its security forces, including the ISI, have rendered enormous sacrifices against militancy and terrorism," the government statement said. "Our contributions have been acknowledged by the international community, in particular by the United States."

The documents, which were released by the online whistle-blower Wikileaks, raised new questions about whether the U.S. can persuade Pakistan to sever its historical links to the Taliban and deny them sanctuary along the Afghan border — actions that many analysts believe are critical for success in Afghanistan. They were released at a time when tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan was easing.

"The recent documents leaked out to the media clearly support and verify Afghanistan's all-time position that success over terrorism does not come with fighting in Afghan villages, but by targeting its sanctuaries and financial and ideological sources across the borders," a statement issued by Afghan President Hamid Karzai's office said. "Our efforts against terrorism will yield no productive results as long as these sanctuaries and sources remain intact."

While Karzai didn't mention Pakistan by name, it was clear that he was referring to the border area of Pakistan where militants plot and plan attacks in Afghanistan.

Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's ambassador to the U.S., noted that many of the documents were dated and did not "reflect the current on-ground realities." The United States, Afghanistan and Pakistan are "jointly endeavoring to defeat al-Qaida and its Taliban allies militarily and politically," he said.

Pakistan helped the Taliban seize power in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Although the government renounced the group in 2001 under U.S. pressure, many analysts believe Pakistan refuses to sever links with the Taliban because it believes they could be useful allies in Afghanistan after foreign forces withdraw.

White House national security adviser Gen. Jim Jones defended the partnership between the U.S. and Pakistan in a statement Sunday, saying "counterterrorism cooperation has led to significant blows against al-Qaida's leadership."

Still, he called on Pakistan to continue its "strategic shift against insurgent groups." The U.S. has had little success convincing Pakistan to target Afghan Taliban militants holed up in the country, especially members of the Haqqani network, which the U.S. military considers the most dangerous militant group in Afghanistan.

The U.S. has given Pakistan billions in military aid since 2001 to enlist its cooperation. But the leaked reports, which cover a period from January 2004 to December 2009, suggest current and former ISI officials have met directly with the Taliban to coordinate attacks in Afghanistan.

A senior ISI official denied the allegations, saying they were from raw intelligence reports that had not been verified and were meant to impugn the reputation of the spy agency. He spoke on condition of anonymity in line with the agency's policy.

In one report from March 2008, the ISI is alleged to have ordered Siraj Haqqani, a prominent militant based in northwestern Pakistan, to kill workers from archenemy India

who are building roads in Afghanistan. In another from March 2007, the ISI is alleged to have given Jalaluddin Haqqani, Siraj's father, 1,000 motorcycles to carry out suicide attacks in Afghanistan. The Haqqanis run a military network based in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal area that is believed to have close ties with the ISI.

Other reports mention former ISI officials, including Hamid Gul, who headed the agency in the late 1980s when Pakistan and the U.S. were supporting Islamist militants in their fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan. In one report, Gul, who has been an outspoken supporter of the Taliban, is alleged to have dispatched three men in December 2006 to carry out attacks in Afghanistan's capital.

"Reportedly Gul's final comment to the three individuals was to make the snow warm in Kabul, basically telling them to set Kabul aflame," said the report.

Gul, who features multiple times throughout the reports, denied allegations that he was working with the Taliban, saying "these leaked documents against me are fiction and nothing else."

Wikileaks released the documents, which include classified cables and assessments between military officers and diplomats, on its website Sunday. The New York Times, London's Guardian newspaper and the German weekly Der Spiegel were given early access to the documents.

The Guardian expressed skepticism about the allegations in the documents, saying "they fail to provide a convincing smoking gun" for complicity between the ISI and the Taliban. It said more than 180 intelligence files accuse the ISI of supplying, arming and training the insurgency since at least 2004. One of the reports even implicates the ISI in a plot to assassinate Karzai, said the newspaper.

Karzai's spokesman said that while the Afghan government was "shocked" that such a large number of documents were leaked, Karzai's immediate reaction was that "most of this is not new." He said Afghan officials studying the papers were particularly interested in ones describing incidents that resulted in civilian casualties. In an afternoon briefing, Omar said that fewer civilians have been killed since NATO instigated new battlefield procedures in recent months.

A few hours later, Karzai blasted NATO, saying a rocket attack last Friday killed 52 civilians in southern Afghanistan.

NATO said none of its initial reports confirmed any civilian deaths in the area or NATO rockets going astray.

However, a statement released by Karzai's office said the Afghan intelligence service had determined that a NATO rocket hit Regi village in Helmand province's Sangin district Friday. The statement said women and children were among the dead.

"I don't have any operation reporting to corroborate the reports of civilian casualties," said Col. Wayne Shanks, a spokesman for NATO and U.S. forces.

He said NATO forces battled insurgents Friday in an area about seven or eight kilometers (four or five miles) away. Helicopters were called in that fired rockets in support of ground forces but there was no evidence in initial reports that this firefight was connected to the claims of rocket fire in Regi, Shanks said.

An assessment team traveled to Helmand on Monday to further investigate the claims, he said.