

U.S. Pledges to Pay Family of Those Killed in Botched Kabul Drone Strike

The Pentagon offered unspecified amounts to relatives of the 10 civilians who died in Aug. 29 attack and agreed to help relocate those who want to move to the U.S.



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WASHINGTON — The Pentagon offered unspecified condolence payments this week to the family of the 10 civilians, including seven children, who the military has acknowledged were mistakenly killed on Aug. 29 in the last U.S. drone strike before American troops withdrew from Afghanistan.

In a statement released late Friday, the Pentagon also said it was working with the State Department to help surviving members of the family relocate to the United States.

The offers were made in a virtual meeting on Thursday between Colin H. Kahl, the under secretary of defense for policy, and Steven Kwon, the founder and president of Nutrition & Education International, the aid organization that employed Zemari Ahmadi, the driver of a white Toyota sedan that was struck by the American drone.

Senior Defense Department officials and military commanders conceded last month that Mr. Ahmadi had nothing to do with the Islamic State, contrary to what military officials had previously asserted. Mr. Ahmadi's only connection to the terrorist group appeared to be a fleeting and innocuous interaction with people in what the military believed was an Islamic State safe house in Kabul, an initial link that led military analysts to make one misjudgment after another while tracking Mr. Ahmadi's movements in the sedan for the next eight hours.

"Dr. Kahl noted that the strike was a tragic mistake and that Mr. Zemari Ahmadi and others who were killed were innocent victims who bore no blame and were not affiliated with ISIS-K or threats to U.S. forces," said the statement from John F. Kirby, the Defense Department's chief spokesman.

Mr. Kirby said Dr. Kwon had recounted Mr. Ahmadi's work with the aid group over many years as an electrical engineer, "providing care and lifesaving assistance for people facing high mortality rates in Afghanistan."

The Pentagon statement came after Mr. Ahmadi's family members in Kabul complained that American officials had not contacted them about relocating to the United States or offering condolence payments.

Pentagon officials said on Friday that no specific amount for condolence payments was discussed in Thursday's meeting, but that it would be in future discussions between the department and the aid organization and its lawyers, who are acting on behalf of the family in Afghanistan.

Congress has authorized the Pentagon to pay up to \$3 million a year for payments to compensate for property damage, personal injury or deaths related to the actions of U.S. armed forces, as well as for "hero payments" to the family members of local allied forces, such as Afghan or Iraqi troops fighting Al Qaeda or ISIS.

Condolence payments for deaths caused by the American military have varied widely in recent years. In fiscal 2019, for instance, the Pentagon offered 71 such payments — ranging from \$131 to \$35,000 — in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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Almost everything senior defense officials asserted in the hours, days and weeks after the drone strike turned out to be false. The explosives the military claimed were loaded in the trunk of the sedan struck by the drone's Hellfire missile were probably water bottles, and a secondary explosion in the courtyard in the densely populated Kabul neighborhood where the attack took place was probably a propane or gas tank, officials said.

Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of Central Command, said in a news conference last month that the strike was carried out "in the profound belief" that ISIS was about to attack Hamid Karzai International Airport, as the organization had done three days earlier, killing about 170 civilians and 13 U.S. troops.

The acknowledgment of the mistaken strike came a week after a New York Times investigation of video evidence challenged assertions by the military that it had struck a vehicle carrying explosives meant for the airport.

Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III has ordered a review of the military's inquiry into the drone strike to determine, among other issues, who should be held accountable and "the degree to which strike authorities, procedures and processes need to be altered in the future."

The task has been assigned to Lt. Gen. Sami D. Said, the Air Force inspector general, and is expected to be completed next month. In the meantime, Mr. Austin, a retired four-star Army general, has ordered that any further airstrikes in Afghanistan receive his approval.

"Nothing can bring Zemari or these other precious people back, but we appreciate the opportunity to discuss these devastating losses in detail with senior Defense Department officials," Dr. Kwon said in a statement released by the American Civil Liberties Union, which is representing the aid group. "We hope they will act urgently to get surviving family members and impacted N.E.I. employees to safety and to help them to rebuild their lives."