

Pentagon acknowledges Aug. 29 drone strike in Afghanistan was a tragic mistake that killed 10 civilians.



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WASHINGTON — The Pentagon acknowledged on Friday that the last U.S. drone strike before American troops withdrew from Afghanistan was a tragic mistake that killed 10 civilians, including seven children, after initially saying it had been necessary to prevent an attack on troops.

The extraordinary admission provided a horrific punctuation to the chaotic ending of the 20-year war in Afghanistan and will put President Biden and the Pentagon at the center of a growing number of investigations into how the administration and the military carried out Mr. Biden's order to withdraw from the country.

Almost everything senior defense officials asserted in the hours, and then days, and then weeks after the Aug. 29 drone strike turned out to be false. The explosives the military claimed were loaded in the trunk of a white Toyota sedan struck by the drone's Hellfire missile were probably water bottles, and a secondary explosion in the courtyard in a densely populated Kabul neighborhood where the attack took place was probably a propane or gas tank, officials said.

In short, the car posed no threat at all, investigators concluded.

The acknowledgment of the mistake 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 Hamid Karzai International Airport.

Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III 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."

Congressional lawmakers, meanwhile, said they wanted their own accounting from the Pentagon.

Senior Defense Department leaders conceded that the driver of the car, Zemari Ahmadi, a longtime worker for a U.S. aid group, 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 ISIS safe house in Kabul, an initial link that led military analysts to make one mistaken judgment after another while tracking Mr. Ahmadi's movements in the sedan for the next eight hours.

"I offer my profound condolences to the family and friends of those who were killed," Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of U.S. Central Command, told reporters at a Pentagon news conference on Friday.

The general said the strike was carried out "in the profound belief" that ISIS was about to attack Kabul's airport, as the organization had done three days earlier, killing more than 140 people, including 13 American service members.



Seven children, including this boy's sister, were killed in the drone attack. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The general said the Times investigation helped investigators determine that they had struck a wrong target. "As we in fact worked on our investigation, we used all available information," General McKenzie told reporters. "Certainly that included some of the stuff The New York Times did."

The findings of the inquiry by the military's Central Command mirrored the Times investigation, which also included interviews with more than a dozen of the driver's co-workers and family members in Kabul. The Times inquiry raised doubts about the U.S. version of events, including whether explosives were present in the vehicle. It also identified the driver and obtained security camera footage from Mr. Ahmadi's employers that documented crucial moments during his day that challenged the military's account.

Mr. Austin and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had said the missile was launched because the military had intelligence suggesting a credible, imminent threat to the airport, where U.S. and allied troops were frantically trying to evacuate people. General Milley later called the strike "righteous."

On Friday, General Milley suggested that he spoke too soon.

"In a dynamic high-threat environment, the commanders on the ground had appropriate authority and had reasonable certainty that the target was valid, but after deeper post-strike analysis, our conclusion is that innocent civilians were killed," General Milley said in a statement. "This is a horrible tragedy of war and it's heart-wrenching and we are committed to being fully transparent about this incident."

General McKenzie said the conditions on the ground before the strike contributed to the errant strike. "We did not have the luxury to develop pattern of life," he said.

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The Pentagon will work with the families and other government officials on reparation payments, General McKenzie said. Without any American troops in Afghanistan, he said that the task may be difficult, but that "we recognize the obligation."

Military officials said they did not know the identity of the car's driver when the drone fired, but they had deemed him suspicious because of his activities that day: He had visited a suspected Islamic State safe house in a white Toyota Corolla, the same model that other intelligence that day indicated was involved in an imminent plot, and at one point he loaded the vehicle with what they thought could be explosives.

Military officials on Friday defended their assessment that the safe house was a hub of ISIS planning, based on a combination of intercepted communications, information from informants and aerial imagery. Rockets were fired at the airport 24 hours after the U.S. drone strike, General McKenzie said.

But after reviewing additional aerial video and photographs, military investigators concluded that their initial judgment about the driver and his car were wrong, an error that prejudiced their views of every subsequent stop he made that day while driving around Kabul.

Times reporting had identified the driver as Mr. Ahmadi. The evidence suggests that his travels that day actually involved transporting colleagues to and from work. And an analysis of video feeds showed that what the military may have seen was Mr. Ahmadi and a colleague loading canisters of water into his trunk to bring home to his family.

“We now know that there was no connection between Mr. Ahmadi and ISIS-Khorasan, that his activities on that day were completely harmless and not at all related to the imminent threat we believed we faced, and that Mr. Ahmadi was just as innocent a victim as were the others tragically killed,” Mr. Austin said in a statement, referring to an affiliate of the Islamic State.

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The officials said on Friday that a subsequent review concluded, as did the Times investigation, that the suspicious packages were nothing more than water, and possibly a package the size of a laptop computer.

Senior Pentagon leaders, who were already preparing to brief lawmakers on the chaotic end to the war in Afghanistan, will probably face tough questioning on the last drone strike of that engagement.

“I’m devastated by the acknowledgment from the Department of Defense that the strike conducted on Aug. 29 was an utter failure that resulted in the deaths of at least 10 civilians,” Representative Ruben Gallego, Democrat of Arizona, said in a statement. “I expect the department to brief us immediately on the operation, focusing on a full accounting of the targeting processes and procedures which led to the determination to carry out such a strike.”

Civilian deaths from drone strikes have been a recurring problem in more than two decades of fighting in places like Afghanistan and Iraq and are unlikely to go away as the Biden administration moves toward what officials call “over the horizon” operations in Afghanistan — strikes launched against terrorist targets in the country from great distances away.

Since the Aug. 29 strike, U.S. military officials justified their actions by citing an even larger blast that took place afterward in the courtyard where Mr. Ahmadi, who worked as an electrical engineer for Nutrition and Education International, a California-based aid group, made his final stop.

But an examination of the scene of the strike, conducted by the Times visual investigations team and a Times reporter the morning afterward, and followed up with a second visit four days later, found no evidence of a second, more powerful explosion.

Experts who examined photos and videos pointed out that, although there was clear evidence of a missile strike and a subsequent vehicle fire, there were no collapsed or blown-out walls, no destroyed vegetation, and only one dent in the entrance gate, indicating a single shock wave.

Military officials said investigators now believed the second explosion was a flare-up from a propane tank in the courtyard, or possibly the gas tank of a second vehicle in the courtyard.

While the U.S. military initially said the drone strike might have killed three civilians, officials now say that 10 people, including seven children, were killed. The military reached that conclusion after watching aerial imagery that shows three children coming out to greet the sedan, one of them taking the wheel of the car after Mr. Ahmadi got out.

When Mr. Ahmadi pulled into the courtyard of his home, the tactical commander made the decision to strike his vehicle, launching a single Hellfire missile at 4:53 p.m.

Military officials defended the procedures the drone strike commander made in deciding to carry out the strike, with “reasonable certainty” there would be no civilian casualties, even as they described the badly flawed chain of events that led to that decision.

The commander overseeing the drone strike, an experienced operator whom the Pentagon did not identify, faced a difficult decision in his mind: Take the shot while the sedan was parked in a relatively isolated courtyard, or wait until the sedan drove even closer to the airport — and denser crowds — increasing the risk to civilians.

In the end, however, officials said on Friday, tragically, it was the wrong call.