**Obama Apologizes for Airstrike on Afghan Hospital**

October 7, 2015

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WSJ

http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-apologizes-to-doctors-without-borders-for-airstrike-that-hit-hospital-1444245760

President [Barack Obama](http://topics.wsj.com/person/O/Barack-Obama/4328) personally apologized for the [deadly U.S. airstrike](http://www.wsj.com/articles/airstrike-kills-doctors-without-borders-staff-in-afghanistan-1443851465) on a hospital run by Doctors Without Borders in northern Afghanistan, even though investigations into the incident are incomplete and U.S. officials have said Afghan forces played a key role in calling for the strike.

Mr. Obama on Wednesday placed a phone call to the group’s international president, Joanne Liu, “to apologize and express his condolences” for the 12 staff members and 10 patients who were killed after U.S. forces “mistakenly struck” the organization’s Kunduz hospital, White House press secretary Josh Earnest said.

The move marked a reversal from the White House position a day earlier, when Mr. Earnest indicated the U.S. wouldn’t formally apologize for the airstrike until several investigations into the incident had made more progress.

Mr. Obama since learned new information about the airstrike and decided to apologize, Mr. Earnest said, declining to offer details.

“Based on what the president has learned, he believed that it was appropriate for the United States to do what we’ve done before, which is to acknowledge that a mistake had been made, to offer an apology,” Mr. Earnest said.

A day earlier, Army Gen. John Campbell, the commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, said he had directed U.S. forces to undergo training on military rules of engagement, to prevent a similar mistake in the future. Gen. Campbell said the decision to strike was made within the U.S. chain of command, adding that the U.S. would never intentionally strike a hospital.

Doctors Without Borders, also known by the acronym for its French name, MSF, has sharply criticized the U.S. for the airstrike, calling it a war crime and demanding an independent investigation. The organization acknowledged Mr. Obama’s apology, but reiterated its demand for a neutral investigation.

“We received President Obama’s apology today for the attack against our trauma hospital in Afghanistan,” Dr. Liu said. “However, we reiterate our [request] that the U.S. government consent to an independent investigation led by the International Humanitarian Fact-Finding Commission to establish what happened in Kunduz, how it happened and why it happened.”

The Switzerland-based commission was set up in 1991 under the Geneva Conventions.

Mr. Obama also spoke with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Wednesday about the incident. During the call, Mr. Obama “expressed regret” about the airstrike and offered his condolences to the victims and their families on behalf of Americans, the White House said.

The U.S. strike, on Oct. 3, came in the midst of a U.S. military intervention in support of Afghan troops after the Taliban stormed Kunduz city more than a week ago, effectively controlling it for three days. Since then, pro-government forces have struggled to completely clear the city from the insurgency.

Afghan troops controlled most of Kunduz city on Wednesday, including its center, even as sporadic fighting continued in parts of the city and its outskirts.

As Afghan troops battled insurgents Oct. 3, they asked U.S. Special Forces personnel assisting nearby to request air support, U.S. military officials have said. A U.S. AC-130 gunship arrived shortly afterward, and the strike on the hospital compound followed.

American officials initially said U.S. forces requested the airstrikes, but changed that account on Monday, saying Afghan units sought the support.

Zafar Hashemi, a spokesman for Mr. Ghani, confirmed on Wednesday that Afghan forces had requested the airstrike.

“On the specifics of the hospital incident, we are working with our international partners to fully and transparently investigate it,” he said. “We cannot make further comments while the investigation is going on.”

The Obama administration has resisted an independent investigation, saying Mr. Obama is confident that three probes, including one by the Defense Department, would provide a thorough accounting of what happened.

But Mr. Obama’s decision to apologize could have an impact on future military operations and the American service members who conducted the strike.

“If it is necessary to hold individuals accountable, that will be done,” Mr. Earnest said. “And certainly, we’re going to be looking for reforms that we can put in place that make it less likely that these kinds of things happen in the future.”

Mr. Obama has apologized for U.S. military operations before, most recently in April after a U.S. drone strike killed an American and an Italian held hostage during a January attack on an al Qaeda compound in Pakistan.

At the time, he spoke publicly from the White House to “offer our deepest apologies” on behalf of the U.S. government. His apology to Doctors Without Borders was more private, underscoring the sensitivities of the investigations into the incident.

The Afghan government is investigating the incident as part of a joint probe with U.S. officials. Afghan security officials previously have alleged that Taliban fighters were using the Doctors Without Borders compound as a firing position.

The U.S. military is conducting its own probe and an investigations by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization also is under way.

The Pentagon’s shifting accounts of the events represent one question in the investigations. Among other unanswered questions are whether the U.S. gunship crew knew it was firing on a hospital; whether the Taliban had ever used the compound as a base to stage attacks; and what the Afghan forces told the U.S. forces before those American forces called in the strike.

Doctors Without Borders said its main hospital building was bombed for more than an hour, although it had shared details of its exact location with the Afghan and U.S. militaries.