

PAKISTAN'S “TEMOPORARY CAMPSITE” AT CENTER OF NATO BORDER POST ATTACK CONTROVERSY



A partial screen-cap of the Express Tribune website on Friday, showing protesters and dominance of the news by the NATO attack.

The barrage of claims and counter-claims on what took place early Saturday morning just inside the Pakistani side of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border continues at a rapid pace. On Thursday, the Wall Street Journal published an article in which the US military claimed that Pakistan had given clearance for the attack. Despite the Journal claiming they were unable to get a response from Islamabad for the article, responses from Pakistan did not take long, and Pakistan claims that NATO did not contact Pakistan until after the raid was in progress and that incorrect location information was given in the first contact.

Citing only “US officials” and not giving any names, the Journal describes the joint US-Afghan commando operation that night as hunting Taliban militants in the border area when they came under fire:

The commandos thought they were being fired upon by militants. But the

assailants turned out to be Pakistani military personnel who had established a temporary campsite, U.S. officials said.

According to the initial U.S. account from the field, the commandos requested airstrikes against the encampment, prompting the team to contact a joint border-control center to determine whether Pakistani forces were in the area, a U.S. official said.

The border-control center is manned by U.S., Afghan and Pakistani representatives who are supposed to share information and head off conflicts. But the U.S. and Afghan forces conducting the Nov. 26 commando operation hadn't notified the center in advance that they planned to strike Taliban insurgents near that part of the border, the official said.

When called, the Pakistani representatives at the center said there were no Pakistani military forces in the area identified by the commandos, clearing the way for the Americans to conduct the airstrikes, the U.S. officials said.

Despite the Journal claiming that they could not get a response from Islamabad on this information, the Express-Tribune carries this response in a Reuters story:

A Pakistani military official categorically denied the Journal's account, saying the aircraft had already engaged when Pakistan was contacted.

"Wrong information about the area of operation was provided to Pakistani officials a few minutes before the strike," said the official, who was not authorized to speak to the media.

"Without getting clearance from the

Pakistan side, the post had already been engaged by US helicopters and fighter jets. Pakistan did not have any prior information about any operation in the area.”

Sorting out just whom to believe in this case is difficult. As commenter marc said in the thread from yesterday’s post:

Pakistan’s ISI says one thing NATO’s ISAF says the opposite. Two known habitual liars with conflicting stories means we are unlikely to ever know the truth.

Also in yesterday’s post was a video purportedly released by Pakistan’s military, showing the aftermath of the attack. It can help to sort out one portion of the claims and counter-claims. Note that in the Wall Street Journal article, the US mentions a “temporary encampment”, while Pakistan has maintained all along that the attack was on an established border post, comprised of permanent buildings, that should have been clearly marked on all NATO maps. Now watch the video again:

[youtube]<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BSoEeLgnm0>[/youtube]

The first part of the video, shot from the air, shows a fairly large area of a ridge-top that has been burned, presumably from the NATO attack. We also see several established, permanent buildings which fit Pakistan’s description of the Volcano border post. However, when the video switches to footage shot on the ground, we only see things that are more consistent with the US description of a “temporary campsite”. There are shelters which appear to be corrugated metal covering holes dug into the hillside, with the metal covered by dirt and branches. There also is an area of rocks piled together in something that looks like a child’s snowfort, and there appear to be dead bodies in the center of it. Strikingly, in

this part of the footage, we see no permanent buildings that would correspond with those seen in the aerial footage.

The primary key to understanding just what took place Saturday morning will be to see just how close this "temporary campsite" is to the Volcano border post and to understand why Pakistani troops were there instead of at the established post. It would not surprise me for Pakistan to claim the "temporary campsite" is in fact an outlying guard site protecting the Volcano post. Also, the US could progress to claiming the "temporary campsite" was set up deliberately to evoke a NATO attack.

In the meantime, stories continue to fly on how Pakistan is now revising its rules of engagement and how the Pakistani air force was unable to scramble in time to respond to the attack. If this crisis is to be understood and perhaps defused, though, I think that will rest on gaining a full understanding of the "temporary campsite".