

NATO HELICOPTER ATTACK KILLS UP TO 28 AT PAKISTANI BORDER POST, SUPPLY CROSSINGS CLOSED



Backlog of supply trucks at Torkham crossing after closure in September, 2010. (Digital Globe photo on Flickr)

In September of 2010, the US and Pakistan faced a crisis in relations after the killing of two Pakistani soldiers at a border outpost.

Pakistan closed the Torkham supply crossing through the Khyber Pass as a result of the incident. Today, Pakistan has closed both the Torkham and the Chaman crossings, indicating a very strong response to an incident in which up to 28 have been killed at a Pakistani border post.

The Washington Post describes the situation in this way:

The Pakistani army on Saturday accused NATO helicopters of firing on two Pakistani border checkpoints and killing 24 soldiers, and officials quickly closed a key border crossing used by convoys carrying supplies to Afghanistan.

The attack, which took place early Saturday in the Mohmand region of

Pakistan's tribal belt along the Afghan border, seemed certain to mark a new downturn in the ever-rocky U.S.-Pakistan alliance. NATO troops battling militants in Afghanistan coordinate border operations with the Pakistani military, but Pakistan does not allow coalition forces to enter or fire inside its territory without permission. Various Islamist militant factions are based in Pakistan's remote tribal areas, from where they can easily slip across the border to attack inside Afghanistan.

Pakistani officials issued swift condemnations. The powerful army chief, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, said in a statement that the firing was an unprovoked act of "aggression" that prompted Pakistani troops to fire in self-defense. Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said the matter would be "taken up by the foreign ministry, in the strongest terms, with NATO and the U.S."

We learn from the Express Tribune that the order to close at least the Torkham crossing was not a local decision:

Official sources confirmed the suspension of supplies, adding that all containers were stopped at the Takhta Baig check post in Jamrud tehsil of Khyber Agency.

"We have suspended the supply and will not let even a single container move ahead," the official added.

"We have stopped NATO supplies after receiving orders from the federal government," Mutahir Hussain, a senior administration official in Khyber tribal region, on the Afghan border, told AFP. "Supply trucks are being sent back to Peshawar."

The Reuters description of the incident tells us the Chaman crossing also is closed:

NATO supply trucks and fuel tankers bound for Afghanistan were stopped at Jamrud town in the Khyber tribal region near the city of Peshawar hours after the raid, officials said.

"We have halted the supplies and some 40 tankers and trucks have been returned from the check post in Jamrud," Mutahir Zeb, a senior government official, told Reuters.

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The border crossing at Chaman in Baluchistan was also closed, Frontier Corps officials said.

It would appear that the US knows it has made a huge mistake. The Washington Post article carries this apology from ISAF Commander John Allen:

"This incident has my highest personal attention and my commitment to thoroughly investigate it to determine the facts," said General John R. Allen, commander of the International Security Assistance Force. "My most sincere and personal heartfelt condolences go out to the families and loved ones of any members of Pakistan Security Forces who may have been killed or injured."

The Post also cites Pakistani media as reporting that there may also have been civilian casualties, which, if true, would fan anti-US feelings in Pakistan even more.

Furthermore, NATO also is not even engaging in its usual dance of first denying responsibility and then admitting it later. From Reuters via Dawn:

A spokesman for Nato-led troops in

Afghanistan confirmed that Nato aircraft had been called in to support troops during an incident near the border with Pakistan, and its forces were “highly likely” responsible for deaths of Pakistani soldiers.

“Close air support was called in, in the development of the tactical situation, and it is what highly likely caused the Pakistan casualties,” said Brigadier General Carsten Jacobson, spokesman for the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

The closing of Torkham for 10 days last year did not harm the US supply lines significantly, even though there was the huge accumulation of trucks seen in the photo above and a number of fuel tankers were attacked and burned in various locations throughout Pakistan in what appeared to be an intentional lowering of security along the usual transport routes through the country.

Closing both major crossings poses a larger threat to supplies, however, as about half of NATO’s supplies come into Afghanistan over the ground through Pakistan. The key developments to watch in this closing are how long it lasts and whether convoys are attacked throughout the country again, indicating security has been lowered once again.