

Army closes case on fatal helicopter accident

By Robert Burns
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — After a months-long investigation, the Army has failed to determine what caused the fatal crash last spring of an Apache helicopter on training maneuvers in Albania, the Army said Monday.

Two soldiers killed in the accident were the only U.S. troop casualties in the NATO war against Yugoslavia.

The Apache investigation has been closed, and the cause will be listed as unknown "due to the degree of damage sustained during the crash sequence," Army

spokesman Col. Edwin Veiga said. In what he described as a highly unusual outcome, Veiga said investigators could find no definitive answer to what caused the crash.

On May 5, the Apache was leading a formation of five helicopters over mountainous terrain in northern Albania when its nose pitched up and the chopper rolled to the right. It fell 150 feet and exploded in flames on the ground, according to the Dayton Daily News, which obtained an Army report on the crash.

Chief Warrant Officer David Gibbs, 38, of Massillon, Ohio, and

Chief Warrant Officer Kevin Reichert, 28, of Chetek, Wis., were killed.

Early indications pointed to mechanical failure, but Veiga said investigators were ultimately unable to determine a cause.

Apaches are the Army's best attack helicopters and were used extensively in the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq. Flown with a crew of two, they are armed with as many as 16 laser-guided Hellfire missiles designed to knock out tanks. In addition, they carry 70 mm rockets and a 30 mm cannon that can fire 625 rounds per minute.

More than half the Army's fleet of 743 Apaches has been grounded since last November to replace their tail rotor bearings or to replace transmission parts. The decision to ground the choppers was made when the Army determined that the tail rotor bearing

was the cause of an Apache crash in January 1999.

Veiga said all Apaches deployed abroad have been repaired and returned to service. The full fleet is scheduled to be back in operation by April.

Barak, Arafat meet after bombing

By Dina Kraft
The Associated Press

HADERA, Israel — Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat held a secret meeting Monday night just hours after a pipe bomb suspected of being aimed at derailing the peace process injured 22 Israelis, most of them only slightly.

The meeting came as Palestinians were accusing Israel of reneging on its commitments by postponing a West Bank troop withdrawal, due to have taken place Thursday.

Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh told Israel TV the meeting was aimed at pushing the peace process forward. The two leaders were to have met later this week in Washington, but Barak canceled his trip following Monday's postponement of peace talks with Syria.

Meanwhile, Israel Radio reported that Barak was asking Arafat for a two-month delay in reaching a framework agreement for a final peace treaty.

The sides had agreed to develop a framework agreement by Feb. 13. Barak aide Gadi Baltiansky said that Israel hoped to meet the February deadline, but that "if not, we'll reach an agreement with them [the Palestinians] for something else."

Monday's meeting at an undisclosed site demonstrated both leaders' commitment to negotiations despite the pipe bomb attack in the northern Israeli city of

Hadera. Police officials said the blast was probably carried out by Islamic militants who hope to derail the peace process, although the largest hard-line Muslim group, Hamas, denied any involvement.

A small, little-known Lebanese group, Omar Mukhtar, claimed responsibility for the blast in a fax sent to Lebanese state-run television. However, Israeli police said they had no information that the group was involved.

Despite quick condemnation of the attack by Arafat's Palestinian Authority, opponents of the peace process were quick to use the bombing to rally opposition for the talks.

"Israel cannot run negotiations under threat and under intimidation," opposition legislator Ruby Rivlin said.

Barak said the attack would not affect peace talks.

"We are a strong people, very tough," he said. "We understand the missions before us, and no type of terror will break our spirit."

The Palestinians have been frustrated with the progress of the talks and were infuriated Monday when Barak postponed a withdrawal from the West Bank that had been scheduled for Thursday. Barak said he needed the three-week delay to focus on the Syrian track.

The withdrawal was to be one of the last interim withdrawals before final peace treaty negotiations start next month. The Palestinians hoped it meant Israeli forces would leave three Arab suburbs of Jerusalem, claimed by both sides

as their capital. But Barak insisted the suburbs would not be part of the next withdrawal.

Other Israeli officials tried to soothe Palestinian anger, saying the talks were progressing according to plan.

"It is natural that there should be disagreements, but this is not a crisis," Foreign Minister David Levy said.

Barak won elections in May promising to revive the Palestinian and Syrian peace processes, which were frozen for three years by his hard-line predecessors. He pledges to have agreements in place this year. Troubles on both fronts — Barak postponed talks with the Syrians on Monday — make that seem increasingly unlikely.

In the placid, tree-lined town of Hadera, the blast left residents feeling that peace, whatever its dimensions, would not remove the threat of terror.

"I believe that we must have peace, but in the meantime everyone must look around and be aware," said Eliran Assaf, a university student who shoved his wife and daughter inside a bank when he heard the blast.

Alastair Meir, a 75-year-old Polish-born Holocaust survivor treated for shock, said he refused to let such attacks rattle him.

"The trash can blew up right next to the bench where I was sitting," he said, sitting up in his hospital bed. "I sit there every day, and I'll keep on sitting there, because it's the best spot in Hadera."



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