

American hostage killed by U.S. drone strikes targeting al-Qaida

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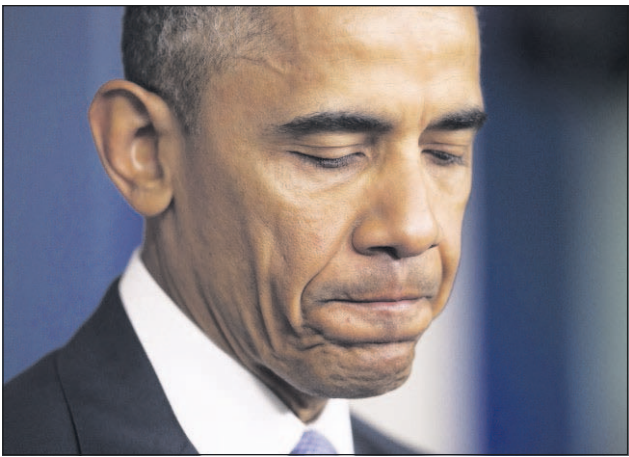
WASHINGTON — Blaming the “fog of war,” President Barack Obama revealed Thursday that U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan inadvertently killed an American and an Italian, two hostages held by al-Qaida, as well as two other Americans who had leadership roles with the terror network.

Obama somberly said he took full responsibility for the January CIA strikes and regretted the deaths of hostages Warren Weinstein of Rockville, Maryland, and Giovanni Lo Porto, an Italian aid worker. The president cast the incident as a tragic consequence of the special difficulties of the fight against terrorists.

The incident is likely to spark fresh scrutiny of Obama’s use of drones to target terrorists and his pledge to strike only when there is “near certainty” no civilians will be harmed.

Weinstein, nearing the end of a contract assignment with the U.S. Agency for International Development, and Lo Porto were killed during a drone strike against an al-Qaida compound in Pakistan, near the Afghan border. U.S. officials said the compound was targeted because intelligence showed it was frequented by al-Qaida leaders. That same intelligence offered no indication the hostages were there, the officials said.

Ahmed Farouq, a dual U.S.-Pakistani national who was an al-Qaida operations leader in Pakistan, was killed in the strike, along with a small number of members of the terror organization, the officials said. Adam Gadahn, an American who served as an al-Qaida spokesman, was killed in a separate strike on a second



AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais

President Barack Obama pauses while speaking in the Brady Press Briefing Room of the White House Thursday. The president took full responsibility for deaths of American and Italian hostages and expressed apologies.

compound. “It is a cruel and bitter truth that in the fog of war generally and our fight against terrorists specifically, mistakes — sometimes deadly mistakes — can occur,” Obama said at the White House.

U.S. officials said Farouq and Gadahn were not specifically targeted in the operations and there was no evidence they were at either compound.

The officials said had they reviewed hundreds of hours of surveillance of the compounds, including continuous monitoring of the facility where Farouq was killed in the days leading up to the strike.

“We believed that this was an al-Qaida compound, that no civilians were present and that capturing these terrorists was not possible,” Obama said. “And we do believe that the operation did take out dangerous members of al-Qaida.”

The president said he had ordered a review of the incidents to help identify any changes that might be made to prevent similar deaths in the future.

The CIA drone program

has killed al-Qaida leaders, Pakistani Taliban fighters and other militants hiding in tribal regions, sparking anger across Pakistan over allegations of widespread civilian casualties. Since 2004, the U.S. has carried out some 400 suspected drone strikes in Pakistan, according to the New America Foundation’s International Security Program, which tracks the American campaign.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest said Obama did not personally sign off on the two drone strikes but believes they fell within the guidelines he has set for counterterror missions. Earnest also said the president did not regret the deaths of Farouq and Gadahn.

Officials said it became evident in the weeks after the strikes that Weinstein, the American hostage, might have been killed. A final assessment was reached in recent days and administration officials started briefing members of Congress.

House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, welcomed Obama’s review of the incident, calling it “entirely appropriate.” And Califor-

nia Rep. Adam Schiff, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said it would be crucial to examine the operation “to make sure that the high standards that have been set were, in fact, met.”

On Wednesday, Obama spoke with Weinstein’s wife, Elaine, as well as Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi.

In a statement, Elaine Weinstein said the assistance her family received from the U.S. government was “inconsistent and disappointing.”

“We hope that my husband’s death and the others who have faced similar tragedies in recent months will finally prompt the U.S. government to take its responsibilities seriously and establish a coordinated and consistent approach to supporting hostages and their families,” she said.

The White House said compensation would be paid to the Weinstein and Lo Porto families.

Weinstein, a 73-year-old development worker, was abducted in August 2011. His capture came just four days before his seven-year stint with the U.S. Agency for International Development was to end.

Lo Porto was working for the German aid group Welthungerhilfe when he was captured in Pakistan in January 2012. He was kidnapped together with German Bernd Muehlenbeck, who was freed last year.

Renzi expressed his “profound pain” over Lo Porto’s death, saying the aid worker had “dedicated his life to the service of others.”

The two American al-Qaida operatives killed in the strikes had senior roles in the terror organization, though U.S. officials said they were not high-value targets.

U.S. announces plans to reduce agricultural carbon emissions

DETROIT (AP) — Federal agricultural officials announced Thursday voluntary programs and initiatives for farmers, ranchers and foresters meant to build on President Barack Obama’s efforts to combat global warming — and they don’t require congressional approval.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack unveiled the plans at Michigan State University, where Obama signed the sweeping farm bill into law last year. The efforts, many of which have their roots in that law, aim to reduce net greenhouse gas emissions, boost carbon capture and storage and come with various enticements, including grants, low-interest loans and technical assistance.

Vilsack said the agriculture industry accounts for about 9 percent of U.S. emissions, adding that compares favorably with the rest of the globe but can be improved.

“American farmers and ranchers are leaders when it comes to reducing carbon emissions and improving efficiency in their operations,” he said in prepared remarks. “We can build on this success in a way that combats climate change and strengthens the American agriculture economy.”

Before the event, Vilsack said officials “want to do this in a way that will help not only the environment but also improve agricultural productivity with improved yields, and we can also improve the bottom line of producers with greater efficiency.”

Obama administration aides have said the issue of climate change became even more attractive after the November election, because the Democrat has considerable leverage to act without Congress. Such actions, though, have drawn fierce objections from Republicans and the energy industry.

Specific actions include reducing the unnecessary use of fertilizer and methane emissions from cattle and swine, reforestation

areas damaged by wildfire and disease and encouraging tree planting in urban areas. For methane reduction in particular, the federal program promotes installing more anaerobic digesters, which use naturally occurring bacteria to break down organic waste to produce biogas, a fuel similar to natural gas.

Vilsack’s department estimates that if all steps are followed, it would reduce emissions and enhance carbon sequestration by roughly 120 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent — akin to taking 25 million cars off the road a year.

Already, Obama has moved to cut U.S. emissions through tougher fuel economy standards and has set a target of reducing overall greenhouse gas emissions by up to 28 percent below its 2005 level by 2025.

Last year’s landmark agreement that commits the U.S. and China — the No. 1 and No. 2 greenhouse gas emitters — to dramatic action on carbon emissions in the coming years drew sharp criticism. Republican Sen. Jim Inhofe, a Republican from Oklahoma who’s the chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, called that agreement “hollow and not believable,” and has previously vowed to block Obama’s moves.

White House senior adviser Brian Deese said although there’s “a lot of focus on climate change here in Washington,” the issue becomes less rancorous and political elsewhere.

“One of the things that is striking when you get out into different parts of America and you talk to people about their business, communities and how a changing climate is affecting the way they do business, the issue is not partisan, it’s practical,” he said, adding that the many of the steps being taken by the USDA stem from the farm bill passed with bipartisan support.

Loretta Lynch wins confirmation as attorney general

WASHINGTON (AP) — Loretta Lynch won confirmation as the nation’s first black female attorney general Thursday from a Senate that forced her to wait more than five months for the title and remained divided to the end.

The 56-43 vote installs Lynch, now U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of New York, at the Justice Department to replace Eric Holder. Holder has served in the job throughout the Obama administration, becoming a lightning rod

for conservatives who perceived him as overly political and liberal, and even getting held in contempt of Congress.

Lynch, 55, is seen as a no-nonsense prosecutor, and has wide law enforcement support. The issue that tore into her support with Republicans was immigration, and her refusal to denounce President Barack Obama’s executive actions limiting deportations for millions of people living illegally in this country. Questioned on the issue at her confirmation hearing in January, she said she believed Obama’s actions were reasonable and

lawful. Democrats angrily criticized Republicans for using the issue against her, saying an executive branch nominee could not be expected to disagree strongly with the president who appointed her, but Republicans were unapologetic.

Lawyer says fatally injured man lacked belt

BALTIMORE (AP) — No video captured what happened to Freddie Gray inside the police van where officers heaved him into a metal compartment after

pinning him to a sidewalk. The cause of his fatal injury has not been revealed.

But a troubling detail emerged Thursday: He was not only handcuffed and put in leg irons, but left without a seat belt during his trip to the station.

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