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Pakistan faults self in bin Laden hunt

By Tim Craig

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Pakistan says its senior political and military leaders are to blame for not detecting Osama bin Laden's presence in the country and then failing to respond when U.S. forces moved into Pakistani airspace to kill him in 2011, according to a government report that became public Monday.

The report, issued by a high-level commission that spent nearly two years studying the al-Qaeda leader's capture, offers an unusually candid assessment of the failings of Pakistan's intelligence services and military. It provides new insight into how bin Laden, the world's most hunted man at the time, was able to move around and live in Pakistan after the U.S. military flushed him out of neighboring Afghanistan in 2002.

"The failure was primarily an intelligence-security failure that was rooted in political irresponsibility," concluded the Abbottabad Commission, named after the Pakistani city where U.S. Navy SEALs killed bin Laden on May 2, 2011. "In the premier intelligence institutions, religiosity replaced accountability at the expense of professional competence."

The 337-page report is widely thought to have been completed months ago, but it became public Monday only after the news organization al-Jazeera obtained a copy and uploaded the report to its Web site.

Pakistan's Foreign Ministry confirmed the authenticity of the report but declined to comment on it.

The independent committee was commissioned after outrage within Pakistan over the 2011 U.S. raid. The panel interviewed more than 200 people, including bin Laden's wives and couriers, senior military and intelligence officials, and local officials in Abbottabad.

Based on those interviews, the report establishes a timeline that first places bin Laden in Pakistan in early 2002 after he evaded U.S. capture during the battle of Tora Bora in Afghanistan. Although gaps remain in placing his whereabouts during that time, the report suggests that bin Laden traveled throughout northwestern Pakistan for several years, settling at different times in Peshawar and Swat, a militant stronghold. Bin Laden then lived for two years in "a big house with two hallways, three bedrooms" in Haripur, less than 50 miles from Islamabad, the Pakistani capital.

In 2005, bin Laden moved his extended family to Abbottabad, where he probably remained until the Navy SEALs landed two helicopters, blasted through a door and killed him, according to the report. Local officials said they were surprised that he was in Abbottabad, and the report notes that bin Laden was isolated and that his children rarely went outside.

But local officials missed several signs that could have signaled to the country's usually diligent intelligence services that they needed to take a closer look.

The report noted, for example, that bin Laden's compound had four electric meters, presumably to "ensure that none would indicate any excessive consumption of gas and electricity." Local officials "should have immediately noticed the ruse," the report said.

The al-Qaeda leader also took numerous steps to avoid capture, including wearing a cowboy hat in the house, thinking it would conceal his identity from "above," according to testimony from his wives.

But the report concludes that bin Laden was never a high-value target for Pakistan's intelligence services, even though they were aware of CIA efforts to capture him, the report states. Pakistan's main Inter-Services Intelligence agency felt ill-equipped to mount an exhaustive search, and there was little cooperation between the agency and the CIA, the report concluded.

"There was no real and sustained priority given to the search for OBL, although from time-to-time US raised the issue in an accusatory manner," the report says, adding that "culpable negligence and incompetence at almost all levels of government" are to blame for the failure.

The Obama administration's decision to act unilaterally to raid the bin Laden compound soured relations between the two countries and infuriated many Pakistanis. That sentiment carried over to the report, as Pakistani officials described the U.S. operation as a "betrayal" and "a stab in the back."

The Pakistani military's inability to prevent the U.S. incursion into its airspace was the country's greatest "humiliation" since 1971, when Indian forces routed Pakistan in a war that led to the creation of modern-day Bangladesh, the report stated. Despite signals from Washington that American forces would enter Pakistan if they thought they could capture bin Laden, Pakistani's air defenses were set to a "peace time mode" when the U.S. helicopters crossed into Pakistani airspace, the report said.

The helicopters went undetected for their entire three-hour mission, and it was not until hours later that Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari learned about the raid.

The report did not name the leaders whom it found most at fault for the missteps but said, "It is obvious who they are."

"It may be politically unrealistic to suggest punishments for them," the report said. "But as honorable men, they ought to do the honorable thing, including submitting a formal apology to the nation for their dereliction of duty."