

Missile Buyback Stumbles

Blunders Alleged In Plan to Recover Afghan Stingers

4/7/94
By Molly Moore
Washington Post Foreign Service

PESHAWAR, Pakistan—A covert CIA program to buy back U.S. Stinger missiles distributed to Afghan rebel forces during the 1980s has been plagued by failures, miscalculations and wasted money, according to Pakistani and U.S. intelligence sources monitoring the enterprise.

Congress reportedly has authorized more than \$65 million in secret funds for the operation over the last three years. That is about twice as much as the United States originally paid for the estimated 1,000 Stingers it provided to the *mujaheddin* rebel forces in the final years of the war against the Soviet-backed government in Kabul.

But despite the millions, the CIA has recovered only a fraction of the missiles, and it does not know who controls most of the remaining unused weapons, U.S. and Pakistan officials said.

There have been no reports of Stinger missiles being used in Afghanistan since the end of the war with Soviet forces in 1989, and the CIA has been eager to find and reclaim as many as possible that remain because of international fears

that the shoulder-fired missiles could fall into the hands of terrorists who would use them against civilian or military aircraft.

Already, missiles supplied to the *mujaheddin* by the CIA have turned up in the hands of organizations in Iran, Qatar and North Korea. Military leaders involved in Tajikistan's civil war claim to have purchased Stingers recently from contacts in neighboring Afghanistan.

But U.S. and Pakistani officials familiar with the CIA's secret buyback program say the agency's lack of accurate information on the remaining Stingers and what they call its haphazard efforts to purchase them have done little more than quadruple the black-market price of the Stingers and create a cut-throat business of middlemen seeking to extort high commissions for brokering deals between the CIA and Afghan tribal leaders.

See STINGERS, A14, Col. 1

Blunders Alleged in Secret Plan to

STINGERS, From A1

"They turned it into a fish market with everyone running around trying to get hold of Stingers because everybody in between had a stake," said a recently retired officer of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency who was involved in distribution of the Stingers. The CIA has "wasted a lot of money and has not been able to recover most of the Stingers."

A CIA spokesman said the agency would not comment on the program.

The miscalculation and blunder involved with the program was evidenced by an episode in which CIA operatives and one of Afghanistan's wildest tribal chiefs spent weeks in intensive negotiating and finally struck a deal: The chief would hand over at least two U.S.-supplied Stinger anti-aircraft missiles in return for an estimated \$200,000 from the CIA.

But in the final hours, the carefully orchestrated plan went awry. Pakistani paramilitary forces, tipped off to the deal, stormed into Afghanistan and seized the missiles just before the handoff to the CIA go-between, according to Pakistani intelligence sources and others familiar with the incident.

The Afghan tribal chief was so furious at losing both his weapons and his payoff that he ordered his men to kidnap two engineers working with the Pakistani government on a border water project. He has held them captive since last July, demanding his Stingers and \$200,000 from Pakistan as ransom.

The 35-pound Stinger missile, considered the world's most advanced portable missile, is designed to hit low-flying aircraft at a distance of about three miles. It has an infrared guidance system that homes in on heat emitted from the aircraft engine or exhaust. Although it has a system that identifies aircraft as friend or foe, Afghan rebels reportedly scored a higher rate of hits on the battlefield than American troops did in practice because the guerrillas



In 1987 photo, a soldier of the Soviet-backed Afghan army shows what Tass news agency said was a U.S.-supplied Stinger captured from Afghan rebels.

did not have to pause to identify their targets, since any aircraft in the sky was considered their enemy.

The Stinger has become extraordinarily valuable to guerrillas fighting insurgencies, to terrorists and to Third World militaries because it is small enough to be easily hidden and transported and, used properly, is extremely accurate.

The problems now faced by the CIA were debated within the agency, in the Pentagon and in Congress in 1986 when President Ronald Reagan authorized the CIA to provide the sophisticated Stinger missiles to the mujaheddin.

In the early days of the giveaway program, the CIA—which funneled the missiles and other weaponry through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence—kept detailed and accurate records on the serial numbers and distribution of the Stingers.

But when the introduction of the Stinger missiles began to turn the tide of the war in favor of the mujaheddin and the United States increased the number of missiles it provided, the accounting system broke down, according to officials involved in distributing the weapons in

Pakistan and monitoring the program in Washington. At one point, the CIA was providing Stingers to seven different mujaheddin groups, which then distributed them among their own subcommanders.

"We were handing them out like lollipops," a U.S. intelligence official in Washington said.

U.S. officials now say they believe that the Pakistani intelligence service kept some of the Stingers rather than passing them on to the Afghan mujaheddin, a charge Pakistani officials have denied.

Although the CIA and the various factions of the present Afghan government say they do not know how many usable missiles remain in Afghanistan, the Pakistani intelligence official who was responsible for distributing several hundred of the missiles in the late 1980s said as many as 400 unfired missiles may now be under the control of various Afghan commanders. U.S. analysts calculated that the Afghan mujaheddin fired about 350 of the missiles during the war.

Officials said the CIA's buy-back program has failed largely because the agency has lost track of the mis-

Buy Back Missiles Given Afghans

missiles and made little effort to determine which mujaheddin factions controlled the unused ones before it spread the word in Afghanistan in 1990 that it would pay hefty prices for any that were returned.

Stingers that cost the U.S. Army about \$35,000 each in the mid-1980s when they were purchased from General Dynamics immediately escalated in value. In 1990, the CIA reportedly offered \$50,000 per missile. Now it is willing to pay up to \$100,000, according to Pakistani and U.S. officials.

"You are on your own to strike a good bargain," said the former Pakistani intelligence agent who has met with several of the CIA's middlemen in the bargaining. The price of the missiles is inflated even higher by commissions demanded by middlemen, officials said.

But most Afghan commanders—who are now involved in inter-tribal warfare in Afghanistan—do not want to surrender the weapons at any cost. In a nation at war with itself, the quantity and quality of a leader's weapons are a critical measure of his power, according to Afghan and Pakistani authorities.

"The Afghan government does not intend to allow even a round of ammunition to be taken out of Afghanistan," Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar said on a visit to Tehran last fall, according to the Islamic Republic News Agency.

Hekmatyar, who received more U.S.-financed weaponry than any other mujaheddin commander during the war against the Soviets, has been engaged in brutal civil war in Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, for the past two years in an attempt to overthrow President Burhanuddin Rabbani. In the fiercest fighting of Hekmatyar's campaign, more than 1,000 people have been killed in Kabul in the last two months.

The foul-ups in the CIA buy-back campaign have become legendary in intelligence circles in Pakistan and among tribal leaders in Afghanistan. The CIA is using Pakistani and Af-

ghan contacts to broker agreements with Afghan commanders who they believe may possess unused Stingers.

The incident in the Afghanistan border district of Zabul last summer that led the Afghan tribal chief to kidnap the two engineers has been one of the most celebrated blunders, in part because of the players involved in the bargaining.

The tribal leader who was selling the Stingers, Abdul Salam, is widely known in Urdu as "Rocketi" because of the vast arsenal of surface-to-air missiles and rocketry he accumulated from foreign sources during the Soviet-Afghan war.

Pakistani officials have refused to comment publicly on the incident, but say on background that the kidnapping has caused serious political problems. The two engineers, still being held for ransom, are Chinese experts who were assigned to help Pakistan on a dam project. It is unclear what the Pakistani Frontier Corps did with the Stingers it retrieved.

In an effort to avoid the problem of transporting the Stingers, the CIA experimented with a plan that allowed the middlemen to obtain the Stinger, cut it into unusable pieces and bring back a photograph of the destroyed weapon as evidence. That plan was short-lived when CIA officials became suspicious that the same mutilated Stingers might be appearing in repeated photographs, according to a Pakistani intelligence official.

Pakistani intelligence officials said they believe most Afghan commanders are hoarding the usable Stinger

missiles, but reports are increasing of missiles being sold in the black market arms bazaars of Pakistan.

Last fall a Stinger sale ended in a public fight between a Pakistani tribesman trying to negotiate a deal with an Afghan seller in Pakistan's notorious Darra gun bazaar near the Khyber Pass. The buyer, after paying for the missile, alleged that it was unusable and demanded his money back, according to an account in the Pakistan daily News and Pakistani officials.

The Afghan trader offered to test fire the missile to prove that it worked, an untenable proposition as the Stinger missile is unusable once it is fired. The argument was settled in a public tribal court, in which the Afghan trader offered to provide the Pakistani buyer another missile at a reduced price, officials said.

Military experts say they are uncertain as to the shelf life of the battery packs that are critical to firing the missile, but believe most of the unused missiles could be operative for several years if they have been maintained well.

While many U.S. lawmakers have been skeptical of the buy-back program and its high costs, they have continued to fund it in an effort to reduce the number of potential sales to terrorists and arms dealers from other regions, according to congressional officials.

Washington Post special correspondent Kamran Khan contributed to this article.