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PART B6

From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
Sent: Thursday, September 20, 2012 11:10 PM
To: H
Subject: Fw: WSJ - Miscues Before Libya Assault

From: Nuland, Victoria J
Sent: Thursday, September 20, 2012 10:42 PM
To: Sullivan, Jacob J; Reines, Philippe I; Mills, Cheryl D; Nides, Thomas R; Sherman, Wendy R; Kennedy, Patrick F; Boswell, Eric J
Subject: Fw: WSJ - Miscues Before Libya Assault

This is a real hit piece - they intentionally twisted and misused info shared to help them understand how we work, while using Libyan sourcing as gospel. Totally unprofessional and egregiously inflammatory.

From: PA Clips [mailto:paclips@state.gov]
Sent: Thursday, September 20, 2012 10:19 PM
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Subject: WSJ - Miscues Before Libya Assault

Miscues Before Libya Assault
Wall Street Journal
Updated September 20, 2012, 9:15 p.m. EDT
By MARGARET COKER in Benghazi, Libya, and ADAM ENTOUS, JAY SOLOMON and SIOBHAN GORMAN in Washington

Limited Security in Benghazi, Secrecy Over Safe House, Contributed to Tragedy

The U.S. Consulate in Benghazi under attack on Sept. 11. The deadly assault raised questions about security lapses and misjudgments by U.S. officials.

The deadly assault on a U.S. diplomatic mission in Libya on Sept. 11 was preceded by a succession of security lapses and misjudgments, compounded by fog-of-battle decisions, that raise questions about whether the scope of the tragedy could have been contained.

U.S. officials issued alerts and ordered security precautions in neighboring Egypt ahead of protests and violence on Sept. 11, but largely overlooked the possibility of trouble at other diplomatic postings in the region.

The State Department chose to maintain only limited security in Benghazi, Libya, despite months of sporadic attacks there on U.S. and other Western missions. And while the U.S. said it would ask Libya to boost security there, it did so just once, for a one-week period in June, according to Libyan officials.

The U.S. didn't seriously consider sending in the military during the attack. It summoned rapid-response teams of Marines only after the U.S. ambassador was dead. State Department officials said they doubted the Pentagon could have mobilized a rescue force quickly enough to make a difference during the fighting. The Pentagon waited for guidance from State, which is responsible for diplomatic security, a senior military official said.

Adding a new dimension to the chain of events, the siege also engulfed what officials now describe as a secret safe house used by American officials and security personnel involved in sensitive government programs after last year's Libyan revolution.

Even when that building, also known as the "annex," came under attack, U.S. officials were reluctant to divulge its existence, and the secrecy complicated the Libyan response and the eventual American evacuation, according to Libyan security officials.

The Obama administration has defended levels of security in place. Though intelligence officials are investigating indications al Qaeda's North African affiliate had connections with militants who mounted the attack, U.S. officials say the evidence still indicates it was a spontaneous response to protests in Cairo against an anti-Islamic video. But a detailed review based on interviews with more than a dozen U.S. and Libyan officials shows months of ominous signals suggesting the need for better security, along with missed chances for delivering it.

President Barack Obama, in his re-election campaign, gets high marks from voters on national security, but has drawn Republican criticism over his handling of the anti-American protests.

After a classified briefing to lawmakers by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Thursday, Sen. Susan Collins (R., Maine) called the security "woefully inadequate, given the security-threat environment." The State Department has convened an Accountability Review Board to investigate the attack, something it is required to do after such an incident.

U.S. officials still are struggling to piece together details of the attack. For more than a week after U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens was killed, the State Department couldn't say why he was in Benghazi. On Thursday, officials said they believed he was there to attend the launch of a joint U.S.-Libyan cultural and educational program.

Mr. Stevens and Sean Smith, an information officer, were killed at the consulate, in the first wave of the attack. Former Navy SEALs Glen Doherty and Tyrone Woods died later, at the sensitive safe house or annex a kilometer away. It remains unclear to U.S. and Libyan officials whether the militants knew of that facility or just followed a U.S. convoy to it after the consulate attack.

The apparent lapses extended to firefighting equipment. Rescue attempts at the main building were thwarted in part by the absence of smoke-protection masks and fire extinguishers, said Libyan guards. Senior State Department officials said these wouldn't have provided sufficient protection against the diesel-fueled inferno.

State Department officials said security for the consulate was frequently reviewed and was deemed sufficient to counter what U.S. officials considered to be the most likely threat at the time: a limited hit-and-run attack with rocket-propelled grenades or improvised explosive devices, or IEDs.

There was a string of attacks in Benghazi in the months before Sept. 11, including a June 6 IED explosion outside the consulate compound. "These types of incidents were the ones that were our principal concerns," a senior State Department official said. Based on the outcome of the June 6 attack, in which a perimeter wall was damaged but no Americans hurt, a second State Department official added: "Our security plan worked."

Current and former officials said the security choices in Benghazi reflected efforts by Mr. Stevens to maintain a low-profile security posture and show faith in Libya's new leaders, despite questions about their ability to rein in heavily armed bands of militants. Officials say Mr. Stevens personally advised against having Marines posted at the embassy in Tripoli, apparently to avoid a militarized U.S. presence.

The security plan for the consulate also reflected confidence Mr. Stevens felt in a city where he worked for months with rebels battling Moammar Gadhafi's rule. State Department officials said he didn't consult with Washington before traveling to Benghazi, located in an area that has become notorious for its volatile mix of Islamist militancy and heavy weaponry.

"This is what happens when you're relying on a government that's not in control of the whole country," said Randa Fahmy Hudome, a former U.S. official. Benghazi "was awash with weapons in the hands of various brigades who were all in combat with one another. It wasn't a secret."

A State Department official said Washington doesn't control the travels of ambassadors within countries where they are posted. But some current and former U.S. officials say it was a mistake for the administration to put so much faith in the Libyans to provide adequate security so soon after the revolution, and questioned why more robust contingency plans weren't in place.

One senior State Department official described the Benghazi consulate as a "temporary office" that security officers treated as a "subsidiary" of the embassy in Tripoli, where more strenuous procedures and precautions were in place. "So Tripoli had the plan and the idea was that these people would just fall back on Tripoli, which they did in this situation, so it worked," the official said.

Alarm bells about security in Benghazi started sounding this spring.

On April 10, someone threw an explosive device at a convoy carrying United Nations envoy Ian Martin. On May 22, a rocket-propelled grenade hit offices of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

After the June 6 IED attack on the U.S. consulate, the U.S. asked Libya to step up security around American installations, said a State Department spokesman. Libyan officials say the request was only for one week. A State Department official said the temporary security buildup was needed to repair damage to the wall.

The Libyan who received the request said the added security was two extra cars of men plus some heavy machine guns. After the repairs, Libyan security returned to normal levels: a four-man team of armed guards protecting the perimeter and four unarmed Libyan guards inside to screen visitors.

Tensions remained high, however. On June 11, a rocket-propelled grenade hit a convoy in Benghazi carrying Britain's ambassador to Libya, injuring two bodyguards. Britain closed its consulate in Benghazi.

The U.S. deemed the security level sufficient and decided to stay, "given the very important mission that we have in eastern Libya to support U.S. national security interests," said a senior State Department official. He said "robust" security improvements had been made to the compound since the Americans moved into it in May 2011, including cement barriers and barbed wire.

As the attacks mounted in Benghazi, intelligence agencies warned of the growing security risks, but didn't have specific intelligence about particular threats or planned attacks. On Aug. 27, the State Department issued a travel warning for Libya, citing a threat of assassinations and car bombings in both Benghazi and Tripoli. The warning said the embassy's ability to intervene was limited because armed groups behind the attacks were "neither sanctioned nor controlled by the Libyan government."

In the days before Sept. 11, intelligence agencies issued their annual warning of heightened security risks around the anniversary of the 2001 attacks. Many counterterrorism officials saw a lessened risk this year than last year, which was the 10th anniversary and the first one after the killing of Osama bin Laden.

In Libya, embassy personnel conducted a security review right before the anniversary. It determined there was no reason to think an attack was planned or the consulate in Benghazi was "insufficiently postured," said a senior administration official.

Across the border in Egypt, red flags appeared on Sept. 8, after a radical Egyptian cleric aired on television portions of an anti-Islam video believed made in the U.S. Officials at the U.S. embassy in Cairo that night sent the first of several messages alerting Washington and other embassies in the region to the video and seeking guidance about responding and the potential for a backlash.

The embassy in Cairo knew the film was beginning to get attention because it was monitoring social media, according to State Department officials. "That was well ahead of any intelligence that they got from Washington," one official said.

On Monday, Sept. 10, intelligence agencies sent a warning directly to the U.S. embassy in Cairo saying the protests could turn violent. Diplomatic security officers in Cairo sent most embassy personnel home.

Intelligence analysts at the time had no reason to believe the unrest would spill over to neighboring Libya or beyond, officials said. State Department officials likewise found no reason to put other embassies in the region on heightened alert and decided not to call in Marine teams to help in Cairo.

"We have to put this in context: We've had protest after protest in Cairo. We know where the military is. We know where to find them when we need them," a senior State Department official said.

Ethan Chorin, an American development economist working with U.S. and Libyan officials on a hospital in Benghazi, said he spoke by phone to Mr. Stevens about an hour before the assault, and the ambassador told him there was "no indication of trouble" following the protests in Egypt. Mr. Chorin said a subsequent conversation he had with the ambassador's security officer was cut short by what the officer said was a serious problem. Several minutes later, he could hear explosions from his hotel room across town as the assault began.

During a final call by Mr. Chorin to a security officer at the consulate, the attack began, and his call was cut off.

The attack on the consulate compound started shortly after 9:30 p.m. Benghazi time, which was 3:30 p.m. Eastern time, according to Libyan security guards.

Besides the four armed Libyans outside, five armed State Department diplomatic security officers were at the consulate.

Diplomatic security agent David Ubben was inside the main building with Mr. Stevens and Mr. Smith, the information-management officer, when the attackers set it on fire around 15 minutes after the shooting started.

The three took refuge in a safe room, but found themselves overcome by smoke and agreed they would make a break for it through a window, according to a State Department official familiar with Mr. Ubben's role.

Mr. Ubben, a 30-year-old Iraq war veteran, managed to escape, but lost contact with Messrs. Stevens and Smith in the dense smoke, the official said.

In Washington, officials said, National Security Adviser Tom Donilon informed Mr. Obama of the attack in progress ahead of a 5 p.m. Eastern time Oval Office meeting with Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. By then, the main villa in the consulate compound was on fire.

There was no serious consideration at that hour of intervening with military force, officials said. Doing so without Libya's permission could represent a violation of sovereignty and inflame the situation, they said. Instead, the State Department reached out to the Libyan government to get reinforcements to the scene.

The Libyans sent about two dozen security men, according to members of the reinforcement team, who arrived at the consulate 30 minutes after the fighting had started.

In addition to the shooting, thick black smoke and flames hindered a proper search inside the consulate, an effort further hampered by the absence of fire extinguishers and masks.

Mr. Ubben and the other security agents made several trips into the building to try to find the diplomats but could spend only brief periods inside, and suffered varying degrees of lung damage, said the official familiar with Mr. Ubben's role.

On one trip in, they found Mr. Smith's body and pulled it out. There was no sign of the ambassador.

The American security personnel evacuated the consulate and made their way to the secret site called the annex.

A plane with an American security team from Tripoli arrived in Benghazi about 1:30 a.m., according to the Libyan account. The team found its way to the annex using global positioning devices. Libyans who accompanied the Americans to the scene weren't told of the annex's location because of its connection to sensitive programs, and the Americans didn't give them the GPS coordinates or address. Libyans at an emergency operation center in Benghazi were also kept in the dark to the exact location.

As the U.S. and Libyan reinforcement team arrived from the airport, fighting broke out at the annex.

That assault, using rocket-propelled grenades and mortars, was described in U.S. and Libyan accounts as more sophisticated than the earlier attack on the consulate, and it appeared to involve militants with possible links to al Qaeda.

The Libyans led a convoy of roughly 30 Americans from the safe house to the airport, where a plane had been waiting. But they quickly realized the plane was too small to evacuate everyone at once.

"We were surprised at the numbers of Americans who were at the airport," said Libyan Deputy Prime Minister Mustafa Abushagour. "We figured three or four people. No one told us the numbers ahead of time."

The deputy prime minister said that he learned about the extent of U.S. intelligence operations only after the incident. "We have no problem with intelligence sharing or gathering, but our sovereignty is also key," said Mr. Abushagour.

The first to be flown to Tripoli were American diplomats and civilians. The U.S. security team waited for a second flight. During the wait, Libyan troops went, without any Americans, to the Benghazi Medical Center to retrieve the ambassador's body. Around 8 a.m., according to Libyan officials, the security detail flew back to Tripoli, carrying the body.

Some officials say the U.S. could have sent military forces to Benghazi from U.S. Naval Air Station Sigonella, which is some 450 miles away in Sicily, or mobilized a Marine team in Rota, Spain. Some officials said the U.S. could also have sent aircraft to the scene in a "show of force" to scare off the attackers.

State Department officials dismissed the suggestions as unrealistic. "They would not have gotten there in two hours, four hours or six hours. They don't have troops sitting in a room next to an airplane with a pilot just sitting in the next room drinking coffee," one senior State Department official said.

Some defense officials agreed with that assessment, given limited communications to Americans on the ground during the assault. "It was the fog of war," one said.

At the annex, Mr. Ubben suffered head and leg injuries from a mortar explosion. He was released this week from intensive care but remains at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, in Bethesda, Md., the State Department official familiar with his role said.

Mr. Ubben, a Marylander, is married and has a stepdaughter and an infant son. He is conscious and able to communicate, according to his father, Rex Ubben.

"He's in good spirits," the senior Mr. Ubben said. "They're pretty confident that he'll be able to walk again."

—Julian E. Barnes and Michael M. Phillips contributed to this article.

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