

December 2001 Report by NYT: “High-Level Murmurings That bin Laden Is Dead”

Statements by US and Pakistani officials

By [Global Research](#)

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As the hunt for Osama bin Laden continues on both sides of the border between Afghanistan’s Tora Bora district and the adjacent tribal regions of Pakistan, a succession of speculative and unsubstantiated reports have surfaced suggesting that the Qaeda leader may already be dead as a result of American bombing or even illness.

Over the last three days, the suggestion has come from Pakistan’s president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, from Gen. Tommy R. Franks, the American military commander for Afghanistan, and from Kenton Keith, the spokesman here for the antiterror campaign — as well as in today’s issue of a Pakistani newspaper, The Pakistan Observer.

In the case of President Musharraf, General Franks and Mr. Keith, the statements were conjecture, based on the intensity of the bombings at Tora Bora, not on any tangible evidence of Mr. bin Laden’s death.

Only The Pakistan Observer went further, with a front-page report under an Islamabad dateline that quoted an unnamed Taliban leader as saying that Mr. bin Laden “had a peaceful natural death in mid-December in the vicinity” of the Tora Bora mountains. The report said that his death was the result of a “serious lung complication.”

“He was laid to rest honorably in his last abode” in a grave prepared according to the beliefs of the fundamentalist Wahhabi sect of Islam to which the Qaeda leader belonged, the report said.

Since Sept. 11, Pakistan’s newspapers have rarely failed to produce a daily menu of reports claiming exclusive knowledge of events relating to the Taliban, Al Qaeda and Mr. bin Laden. Many of these accounts have later proved to be exaggerated, wrong or even invented. At the same time, some of the better-known newspapers here have broken major stories ahead of American and European newspapers covering the war, often on the basis of briefings from high-ranking Pakistani intelligence officials.

A former Pakistani government official familiar with The Pakistan Observer said the newspaper has close ties with Inter-Services Intelligence, or I.S.I., the country’s principal military intelligence agency. The agency backed the Taliban from 1994, when their Islamic hard-liners first emerged as a force, until Pakistan officially abandoned them after Sept. 11.

The former government official said that the paper could have been provided information about Mr. bin Laden by the intelligence agency, but he cautioned that this might only mean

that Taliban supporters in I.S.I. wanted to mislead the United States into thinking that Mr. bin Laden might be dead in order to confuse efforts to track him down.

The Pakistan Observer's account included details on what purports to be Mr. bin Laden's funeral, but no specifics on where it occurred, or when, nor any information about the Taliban official who was the paper's supposed source. Nor did the article offer added information about Mr. bin Laden's alleged illness.

"About 30 close associates of Osama bin Laden in Al Qaeda including his most trusted and personal bodyguards, his family members and some 'Taliban friends' attended the funeral rites," the paper said. "A volley of bullets was also fired to pay final tributes to the 'great leader.' "

Last Friday, in an interview recorded by Chinese television during an official visit to China, General Musharraf raised the possibility that Mr. bin Laden could be dead in one of the caves and bunkers at Tora Bora.

The complex was heavily bombed by B-52's after American intelligence officials concluded that a large group of Al Qaeda fighters had retreated to the region, and that hideouts there dating to the guerrilla struggle against Soviet troops in the 1980's were an opportune place for Mr. bin Laden to take cover.

After most of the caves were overrun by Afghan fighters belonging to anti-Taliban forces, large numbers of Al Qaeda fighters were captured or found dead, but still no trace of Mr. bin Laden. The hunt has now extended to include United States marines, and across snowbound mountain passes into Pakistan, where General Musharraf has deployed several thousand Pakistani troops to close off the passes and conduct village-to-village searches.

"He's not in Pakistan, of that we are reasonably sure," the Pakistani leader said. "But we can't be 100 percent sure."

He added: "Maybe he is dead because of all the operations that have been conducted, the bombardment of all the caves. There is a great possibility that he may have lost his life there."

Over the weekend, General Franks, commander of the American campaign in Afghanistan, told reporters that his forces had no idea where Mr. bin Laden was. "He can be in Tora Bora or in that area dead, he can be somewhere else in Afghanistan and still alive, or perhaps he may have gotten into Pakistan," he said.

On Monday, Mr. Keith, the American spokesman in Islamabad, also speculated that Mr. bin Laden could have been killed in the Tora Bora bombing. "It's quite possible," he said. "If he had been affected by that bombing campaign, I don't think it would have surprised anyone."

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