

Libyan Officials Say US Drone Shot Down By Mistake

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By Samy Magdy

Cairo (AP) -- Libyan forces trying to seize Tripoli shot down a U.S. military drone over the capital by mistake last week, officials said Monday.

The U.S. military said it lost the drone Thursday while it was assessing the security situation and monitoring extremist activity. U.S. Africa Command declined to elaborate Monday, saying only that the incident was under investigation.

The self-styled Libyan National Army, led by Gen. Khalifa Hifter, launched an offensive to capture Tripoli in April after seizing much of eastern Libya from Islamic militants and other rivals in recent years. The country was plunged into chaos when a NATO-backed uprising toppled longtime dictator Moammar Gadhafi in 2011.

The country is now split between a government in the east allied with Hifter and one in Tripoli, in the West, that is supported by the United Nations.

The LNA is backed by Egypt and UAE, while the Tripoli-allied militias receive aid from Turkey and Qatar. The fighting has stalled in recent weeks, with both sides dug in and shelling one another along Tripoli's southern reaches. They have also carried out airstrikes and drone attacks.

A senior official in the LNA's general command said they mistook the U.S. drone for a Turkish-made drone used by the Tripoli-allied militias. The LNA also downed an Italian drone southeast of Tripoli in recent days.

The official said the LNA apologized for shooting down the American drone and has "agreed with the Americans to coordinate their operations over Tripoli and its surrounding areas to avoid similar incidents in the future."

The LNA fighters did not share photographs of the U.S. drone online as they usually do when they shoot down drones, including the Italian one last week, another official said.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the media.

On Saturday, the LNA imposed a "no-fly zone" over Tripoli, saying that all flights over the capital city and nearby towns are "prohibited without prior coordination."

The Tripoli fighting forced the U.S. military to pull out a small contingent of American troops who were in Libya in recent years, helping local forces combat the Islamic State group and al-Qaida militants, as well as protecting diplomatic facilities.

In September, the U.S. military said it carried out several airstrikes against IS, killing more than 40 militants in the first American strikes in the North African country in over a year.