



The Big Story

Pentagon to probe alleged waste, fraud in MIA unit

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon is investigating alleged waste and misuse of taxpayer dollars by a military-led unit responsible for finding, recovering and identifying U.S. service members missing in action from past conflicts.

The investigation was disclosed Thursday at a Senate hearing held in response to an Associated Press story revealing an internal Pentagon report that said the search for soldiers' remains on foreign battlefields by the Joint POW-MIA Accounting Command was inept, mismanaged, wasteful and dysfunctional.

Shortly after the AP report July 7, the Government Accountability Office, or GAO, issued a report saying the MIA accounting effort was hampered by weak leadership, infighting and a fragmented approach to planning. The report recommended a more streamlined chain of command and other organizational changes.

Together the reports prompted calls in Congress for action to ensure that the government live up to its pledge to account for as many MIAs as possible — a mission for which the public has spent tens of millions a year.

The internal Pentagon report disclosed by the AP, which military officers had suppressed for months, included accusations of misconduct among those responsible for overseas missions to investigate prospects for recovering remains.

The Pentagon's inspector general will conduct a noncriminal probe of "potential fraud, waste and abuse" of resources by the MIA accounting agencies, according to Bridget Serchak, spokeswoman for the inspector general.

W. Montague Winfield, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for POW-MIA policy, said that in addition to the investigation by the Pentagon's watchdog, officials are looking for a more sensible way of organizing the MIA accounting mission, which lags far behind the goals set for it by the Congress.

Air Force Maj. Gen. Kelly McKeague, commander of the Joint POW-MIA Command, or JPAC, said at the hearing by a Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs subcommittee that the Pentagon cannot achieve the congressionally ordered goal of 200 identifications of war remains per year by 2015.

He said a more realistic possibility is 125 identifications per year by 2018. In recent years the Pentagon has managed no more than 70 to 80 identifications a year of remains of troops who fought in World War II and in Vietnam and Korea. The Pentagon lists 83,000 troops as missing from those conflicts.

At a separate House Armed Services subcommittee hearing Thursday, Brenda Farrell, who authored the GAO report, said the Pentagon lacked a "road map" for this mission and how many resources it deserved.

"Right now it is not clear where this particular accounting mission does fall in terms of priorities with the (Pentagon)," she said.

Also testifying at the House hearing was Paul Cole, who wrote the internal report that was disclosed by the AP. He told the panel that the MIA accounting effort needs to be pursued in a more scientific manner, with more effort focused on improving the way remains are found and recovered abroad.

James E. Koutz, national commander of the American Legion veterans group, issued a statement Thursday saying that if the findings of the GAO report were correct, "Then this is unacceptable."

"This effort should not be slowed by internal conflicts, bureaucratic bickering and mismanaged taxpayer dollars," Koutz said.

Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., expressed outrage at Winfield's statement that three years after Congress ordered the Pentagon to present a plan for achieving the 200-a-year target, the plan is still being "coordinated" inside the department. It's actually "lost in a deep black hole at the Pentagon," she said.

She told Winfield and McKeague to get it done, and she threatened that their budgets "will go away" if their agencies' performance does not improve soon.

McKeague and Winfield defended their organization's effort and commitment to the mission, but they also acknowledged shortcomings, including a long history of infighting and disputes over how to go about the mission.

"Everybody agrees that this is a mission they can be passionate about. I share that passion," McKeague said. "What they can't agree is the approach on how to achieve and fulfill that passion."

At a recent congressional hearing, Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called the situation discouraging and "moving rapidly toward disgraceful." He said he was determined to get to the bottom of it.

Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., told McKeague and Winfield said she and McCaskill intend to write to Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel on the need for urgent corrective action.

"This is an issue that needs a fire lit on it at the top," Ayotte said, adding that she expects additional congressional committee hearings on the topic.

Noting that a 1993 Senate report said the MIA accounting effort was hobbled by internal disorder, Ayotte said the Congress is losing patience with assurances by senior Pentagon officials that they are looking for ways to improve.

"You've been looking and looking for 20 years," she said. "We need to go beyond looking. We need results." She said Hagel needs to set a deadline for action.