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Barack Obama

Drone Deaths of Warren Weinstein and Giovanni Lo Porto

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This morning, I want to express our grief and condolences to the families of two hostages. One American, Dr. Warren Weinstein, and an Italian, Giovanni Lo Porto, who were tragically killed in a U.S. counterterrorism operation.

Warren and Giovanni were aid workers in Pakistan devoted to improving the lives of the Pakistani people. After Warren was abducted by al Qaeda in 2011, I directed my national security team to do everything possible to find him and to bring him home safely to his family. And dedicated professionals across our government worked tirelessly to do so. We also worked closely with our Italian allies on behalf of Giovanni, who was kidnapped in 2012.

Since 9/11, our counterterrorism efforts have prevented terrorist attacks and saved innocent lives both here in America, and around the world. And that determination to protect innocent life only makes the loss of these two men especially painful for all of us. Based on information and intelligence we have obtained, we believe that a U.S. counterterrorism operation targeting an al Qaeda compound in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region accidentally killed Warren and Giovanni this past January.

Yesterday, I spoke with Warren's wife Elaine and Prime Minister Renzi of Italy. As a husband and as a father, I cannot begin to imagine the anguish that the Weinstein and Lo Porto families are enduring today. I realize that there are no words that can ever equal their loss. I know that there is nothing that I can ever say or do to ease their heartache.



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And today, I simply want to say this:

As President and as Commander-in-Chief, I take full responsibility for all our counterterrorism operations, including the one that inadvertently took the lives of Warren and Giovanni. I profoundly regret what happened. On behalf of the United States government, I offer our deepest apologies to the families.

As soon as we determined the cause of their deaths, I directed that the existence of this operation be declassified and disclosed publicly. I did so because the Weinstein and Lo Porto families deserve to know the truth. And I did so because even as certain aspects of our national security efforts have to remain secret in order to succeed, the United States is a democracy committed to openness in good times and in bad.

Our initial assessment indicates that this operation was fully consistent with the guidelines under which we conduct counterterrorism efforts in the region, which has been our focus for years because it is the home of al Qaeda's leadership. And based on the intelligence that we had obtained at the time, including hundreds of hours of surveillance, we believed that this was an al Qaeda compound; that no civilians were present; and that capturing these terrorists was not possible. And we do believe that the operation did take out dangerous members of al Qaeda. What we did not know, tragically, is that al Qaeda was hiding the presence of Warren and Giovanni in this same compound.

It is a cruel and bitter truth that in the fog of war generally and our fight against terrorists specifically, mistakes -- sometimes deadly mistakes -- can occur. But one of the things that sets America apart from many other nations, one of the things that makes us exceptional is our willingness to confront squarely our imperfections and to learn from our mistakes.

Already, I have directed a full review of what happened. We will identify the lessons that can be learned from this tragedy, and any changes that should be made. We will do our utmost to ensure it is not repeated. And we will continue to do everything we can to prevent the loss of innocent lives -- not just innocent Americans, but all innocent lives in our counterterrorism operations.

Today we join their families and friends in honoring Warren and Giovanni -- two humanitarians who came from different countries but who were united by a spirit of service. For decades, Warren lived the ideals of our country, serving with the Peace Corps and later with the United States Agency for International Development. He devoted his life to people across Africa and South Asia. He was a loving husband, father and grandfather who willingly left the comforts of home to help the people of Pakistan. At the time of his abduction, he was a USAID contractor focused on helping Pakistani families escape poverty and give a better life to their children.



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Giovanni's humanitarianism also took him around the world to the Central African Republic, to Haiti and ultimately Pakistan. Like Warren, he fell in love with Pakistan and its people, and believed passionately that he could make a difference in their lives. Giovanni's service reflected the commitment of the Italian people, our great allies and friends, to the security and dignity of people around the world. And today is a reminder of the bonds of friendship between our countries and the shared values that bind Americans and Italians together.

There could be no starker contrast between these two selfless men and their al Qaeda captors. Warren's work benefited people across faiths. Meanwhile, al Qaeda boasted to the world that it held Warren, citing his Jewish faith. Al Qaeda held both men for years, even as Warren's health deteriorated. They deprived these men of precious, irreplaceable years with family who missed them terribly.

Amid grief that is unimaginable, I pray that these two families will find some small measure of solace in knowing that Warren and Giovanni's legacy will endure. Their service will be remembered by the Pakistani men, women and children whose lives they touched and made better. Their spirit will live on in the love of their families, who are in our thoughts and prayers today, especially Warren's wife Elaine, their daughters Alisa and Jennifer, and their families.

And the shining example of these two men will stand as a light to people the world over who see suffering and answer with compassion, who see hatred and offer their love, who see war and work for peace.

May God bless these two brave men, and may He watch over and comfort their families for all the years to come.