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NATO confirms helicopter drone crashed in Libya

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An autonomous helicopter drone crashed in Libya while flying a surveillance mission for NATO as it continues to enforce a no-fly zone over the country, officials confirmed Tuesday.

6a00d8341c630a53ef01538f583792970b-pi The robotic chopper used by the U.S. Navy, known as a MQ-8B Fire Scout, was hovering above Libya's central coast at 12:20 a.m. PDT when NATO's command center lost contact with it.

"This drone helicopter, unmanned, was performing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance over Libya to monitor pro-Kadafi forces threatening the civilian population," NATO Wing Cmdr. Mike Bracken said at a press conference. "We are currently looking into the reasons behind this incident."

It is unclear whether the Fire Scout was shot down or simply lost its communication link with troops on the ground. Either way, it may be the first time a helicopter drone was down in battle.

The video above was posted to YouTube by Agence France-Presse -- the video is only viewable on YouTube, and not allowed for embedding on U.S. websites. The AFP says that Libyan state TV aired footage saying that pro-Kadafi government forces shot down an Apache attack helicopter, built by Boeing Co.

When asked whether these claims were true, Bracken replied: "What I can say is NATO confirms that it's not lost any attack helicopters during Operation Unified Protector. More information will be provided on this incident as it becomes available."

In an article, the Navy Times said "it is unclear exactly from where the unmanned helicopter was being controlled, where it was attached, or where it flew from."

The Fire Scout, developed by Northrop Grumman Corp. in Rancho Bernardo, Calif., was first deployed to battle this year. There are currently two aboard the USS Halyburton and three more in Afghanistan. The drone was not known to be used in Afghanistan.

Although the causes of Tuesday's crash are not known "there have been previous control problems with Fire Scout," as the Navy Times says.

In a test flight last August from Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Md., operators lost contact with the robotic chopper and it wandered into restricted airspace near Washington. Navy operators were able to get control of the drone and later blamed the Fire Scout going rogue on a software problem.