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August 03, 2002

US strike ended bin Laden feud with Omar

FROM TIM REID IN WASHINGTON

THE relationship between Osama bin Laden and Mullah Mohammed Omar, the ousted Taleban ruler, was rent with mistrust, anger and petty squabbles that led to a complete breakdown of trust before the September 11 attacks, according to documents discovered in Afghanistan.

By the summer of 1998, two years after the al-Qaeda leader sought refuge in Afghanistan with three wives, 13 children and a troop of bodyguards, Mullah Omar was so fed up with his unwanted guest that he had struck a secret deal with the Saudis to expel him.

But just before Mullah Omar's order to oust the "arrogant, publicity-seeking" bin Laden, President Clinton launched a missile strike on Afghanistan and Sudan in retaliation for the bombing of US Embassies in Africa. Prince Turki al-Faisal, the head of Saudi intelligence who had brokered the deal, said: "The Taleban attitude changed 180 degrees."

When he returned to Afghanistan a month after the missile attacks, he told *The Wall Street Journal* that Mullah Omar was "absolutely rude" and the deal to send bin Laden packing was off.

According to information stored on computers found in Kabul, far from being a terrorist's paradise, Afghanistan was a nightmare for foreign Arab fighters. They grumbled about the appalling food, considered the Taleban leader an uneducated bumpkin and their efforts at world terrorism were frequently frustrated by the backwardness of the country.

"This place is worse than a tomb," one bin Laden associate wrote to friends in Egypt, on a computer found in Kabul.

The Taleban complained that bin Laden was disrespectful and a snob. Almost as soon as he arrived he began to irritate more moderate Taleban officials, who had no interest in the global jihad. Mullah Mohammed Khaksar, then the Taleban intelligence chief, told bin Laden that he wanted peace. He said to the *Journal*: "I told him he should just go somewhere else. He got mad and we never spoke again."

By 1998, bin Laden had also fallen out with Mullah Omar.

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