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Key Senators Warn Against Cutting Off Aid to Pakistan

By Emily Cadei, CQ Staff

Suspending assistance to Pakistan in the wake of Osama bin Laden's killing would be like "cutting off your nose to spite your face," Republicans' leading Senate appropriator for foreign aid asserted in an interview Tuesday.

South Carolina Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, the ranking member on the Appropriations Committee that funds the State Department and foreign assistance, counseled patience in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, two days after U.S. forces killed the al Qaeda leader at his hideout in a military garrison town about 30 miles outside of Pakistan's capital city, Islamabad.

The discovery of bin Laden's whereabouts, very close to where Pakistani military regiments are based, is "disturbing," Graham said, and it "defies some level of common sense."

Lawmakers, including Graham, have called for a full accounting of how much Pakistani officials knew, a process that Senate Armed Services Chairman Carl Levin, D-Mich., on Tuesday estimated could take months.

Graham said that whatever information emerges, "I do know this -- Pakistan, you can't trust them, and you can't abandon them."

"If you want to create a pathway to a failed state, just pull out," he said.

Instead, Graham said Congress should focus on pushing Pakistan to be more accountable and engaged in the fight against terrorism. "I think it is logical to put on the table reevaluation of U.S. aid," he told reporters.

But he insisted that he did not support cutting aid to Pakistan. Instead, any changes could include a restructuring of aid money. "We need to look at different combinations and having more leverage," he said.

Members on both sides of the aisle have warned against a knee-jerk reaction to Pakistan relations since the news of Bin Laden's death there emerged Sunday evening. Among other things, Pakistani cooperation remains critical to winding down the war in Afghanistan.

"I think we have to know if they knew," Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., the chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said Tuesday. It's not clear if Pakistan's attitude was "benign indifference, or indifference with motive," she said. "It's premature to say that," she added, although she was concerned that "they have very subtly walked both sides of the street."

Then there are questions about what would happen if the United States suspends aid. China or another power could step in and cozy up to Pakistan, for instance.

As of now, Feinstein said, the United States still has interests in the region. "There is real concern that Pakistan remains Ground Zero for terrorism today," she said. Furthermore, if the war in Afghanistan is lost, Pakistan could be the next country to fall into disarray.

And then there's Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. "No question it complicates it," she said.

Islamabad has been in major damage-control mode since it was notified -- after the fact -- of the raid on Bin Laden's compound.

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari penned an op-ed in the Washington Post Tuesday defending his country's role in combatting terror, and noting that the Pakistani people are victims of al Qaeda as well.

"Although the events of Sunday were not a joint operation, a decade of cooperation and partnership between the United States and Pakistan led up to the elimination of Osama bin Laden as a continuing threat to the civilized world," Zardari wrote.

Pakistan's ambassador to the United States, Hussain Haqqani, was slated to meet with House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Peter King, R-N.Y., on Tuesday, King tweeted Tuesday.

The panel's Counterterrorism and Intelligence Subcommittee is holding a hearing on security threats from Pakistan Tuesday afternoon.

Graham said that he still has hope for U.S.-Pakistan relations because there is a large faction of Pakistanis who want to live in peace.

"It's a house divided and we've just got to be patient," said Graham.

Tim Starks and Frank Oliveri contributed to this story

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