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Al Jazeera

Karzai 'holds talks' with Haqqani

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Hamid Karzai, the president of Afghanistan, has met Sirajuddin Haqqani, leader of a major anti-government faction, in face-to-face talks, Al Jazeera has learned.

Haqqani, whose network is believed to be based across the border, is reported to have been accompanied to the meeting earlier in the week by Pakistan's army chief and the head of its intelligence services, according to Al Jazeera's sources.

Karzai's office, however, denied on Sunday that any such meeting took place.

Major-General Athar Abbas, the Pakistani army spokesman, also said he had "no knowledge of such a meeting taking place".

The Haqqani network is described by the US as one of the three main anti-government armed groups operating in Afghanistan, alongside the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

It is thought to be responsible for the most sophisticated attacks in Kabul and across the country.

Increased speculation

Al Jazeera's Zeina Khodr, reporting from Kabul, said reports about Karzai's meeting have fuelled increased speculation in the Afghan capital that Pakistan is trying to strike a deal in Afghanistan that would safeguard its interests here.

"With the US war effort floundering and plans by the White House to start withdrawing troops by July 2011, Karzai may be cosyng up with Islamabad," she said.

"It may be the reason behind the forced resignations of the Afghan interior minister and intelligence chief who are hard-core opponents of the Taliban."

Our correspondent was referring to the resignations of Amrullah Saleh, the head of the Afghan intelligence, and Hanif Atmar, the interior minister, earlier this month.

"Any political agreement may temporarily find a solution - but giving Pakistan a say in Afghan politics could undermine stability in the long term, especially among Afghans hostile to their neighbour," she said.

Afghan media have also reported that secret meetings are taking place and that Karzai is actively trying to hammer out a deal with groups opposed to his government.

Hekmat Karzai, director of the Kabul-based Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies, said such talks would be that of a pragmatic leader who understands the realities of Afghanistan and the region.

"The fact [is] that regional players support is needed, particularly Pakistan," he said.

"[But] we aren't clear what transpired so far, so we have to wait to see what comes out of it."

Talat Masood, a defence analyst and former Pakistani army general, agrees that it is necessary to bring Pakistan and Haqqani into negotiations.

"It would greatly help and facilitate a peaceful exit of US and Nato forces if these warlords and Taliban are prepared to undertake negotiations and reach some sort of understanding of power-sharing," he said.

Some analysts say Karzai has already begun taking steps towards that end.

"Without a doubt Amrullah Saleh was not happy with Pakistani politics, and Pakistan considered him an obstacle in the way of them gaining a foothold in Afghanistan," Ahmed Saeedi, a political analyst in Kabul, told Al Jazeera.

"The Pakistanis have always said if you want peace you have to go through us."