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Reuters

## Clinton says U.S. officials have met with Haqqanis

By Andrew Quinn and Chris Allbritton  
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U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Friday that the United States had held a preliminary meeting with representatives of the Haqqani network, a group of militants Washington has blamed for a series of attacks in Afghanistan.

The revelation came soon after Clinton, in Islamabad with a heavyweight team of U.S. military and intelligence leaders, warned that tough action would have to be taken against Afghan and Pakistani militants if they did not cooperate in efforts to stabilise Afghanistan and pursue peace.

Clinton was asked at a roundtable with journalists about reports that U.S. officials had met with Haqqani representatives directly, even as Washington demanded that Pakistan take a tougher line on the group.

"We have reached out to the Taliban, we have reached out to the Haqqani network to test their willingness and their sincerity, and we are now working among us -- Afghanistan, Pakistan and the United States -- to try to put together a process that would sequence us toward an actual negotiation," Clinton said.

No negotiations are underway, she said.

A senior U.S. official said later the meeting took place in the summer, before September's attack on the U.S. embassy in Kabul that U.S. officials have linked to the Haqqanis.

They said the meeting had been organized by Pakistan's powerful spy agency, the Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which U.S. officials have repeatedly charged with playing a "double game" with Islamist militants and working with the Haqqanis.

"Pakistani government officials helped to facilitate such a meeting," Clinton said.

Pakistan is seen as critical to the U.S. drive to end the conflict in Afghanistan. Clinton, CIA director David Petraeus and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey went to Islamabad to deliver a strong demand for more cooperation on cracking down on militants finding safe havens in Pakistan's mountainous west and northwest.

"We had a very in-depth conversation with specifics," Clinton said at an earlier media conference with Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar. "And we are looking forward to taking that conversation and operationalising it over the next days and weeks. Not months and years, days and weeks."

Later, in her comments to journalists, she added an unspecified warning to the U.S. demand for action.

"I'm warning if we don't handle these safe havens together, the consequences could be drastic for us both," she said.

Friday's media appearances came a day after what had been described as "extremely frank" discussions Clinton and her team held with their Pakistani counterparts.

Pressure on Islamabad has been mounting since U.S. special forces found and killed Osama bin Laden in May in a Pakistani garrison town, where he had apparently been living for years.

The secret bin Laden raid was the biggest blow to U.S.-Pakistan relations since Islamabad joined the U.S. "war on terror" after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

Pakistan's military said the raid was a flagrant violation of sovereignty. U.S. officials wondered whether an ally that receives billions of dollars in American aid had been sheltering the world's most wanted man, which Pakistan denies.

"SNAKES"

The United States had not publicly spelled out exactly how it wanted Pakistan to handle the Haqqanis but Clinton urged them to persuade militants to join peace talks.

"We think that Pakistan for a variety of reasons has the capacity to encourage, to push, to squeeze ... terrorists, including the Haqqanis and the Afghan Taliban, to be willing to engage in the peace process," she said.

Pakistan argues that it can't go after the Haqqanis because the army has its hands full with homegrown militants, like Maulvi Fazlullah, an Afghanistan-based Taliban leader who was driven out by an army offensive in 2009 but who has vowed to return to fight.

Analysts, too, say the Pakistani military could suffer heavy casualties if it attacked the Haqqanis. Sirajuddin Haqqani, head of the network, recently told Reuters he had more than 10,000 fighters under his command.

Clinton said Pakistan would suffer if it took no action.

"You can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbours," she said.

Pakistani leaders, however, must tread cautiously because anti-U.S. sentiments run high. In a rare light-hearted moment, one woman in a town hall meeting compared the United States to a nagging mother-in-law, drawing laughter from Clinton and others.

"And you know, once a mother-in-law, always a mother-in-law, but perhaps mother-in-laws can learn new ways also," she said.

Many Pakistanis are angered by U.S. drone strikes against militants in the northwest, and say the country's army is fighting a war based on American interests.

About 90 people staged a protest in the eastern town of Multan against Clinton's visit. In Quetta, capital of the southwestern Baluchistan province, around 150 people burnt American flags and hit Clinton's picture with shoes.