

Committed to aid Pakistan despite terrorism charge: US

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Washington: Even as a top US lawmaker threatened to block proposed sale of F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan over its alleged support for terrorist groups, the US said it was committed to deliver security assistance to its key ally.

State Department Spokesperson Mark C. Toner Thursday declined to confirm whether Secretary of State John Kerry had received a letter from Senate Foreign Relations committee Chairman Bob Corker regarding subsidised sale of up to eight F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan. "As a matter of policy, though, we don't comment on proposed arms sales or transfers or even our preliminary consultations with the Hill, with Capitol Hill, prior to any formal congressional notification," he said.

But "we are committed to working with Congress to deliver security assistance to our partners and our allies that we believe furthers US foreign policy interests by building the capacity to meet shared security challenges," he said.

Citing Islamabad's relationship with the Haqqani network, an extremist group that has a history of destabilizing Afghanistan, Corker in a Feb 9 letter to Kerry notified the Obama administration of his intention to block the F-16 sale.

"After years of pressuring the Pakistanis on this point, the Haqqani terrorists still enjoy freedom of movement, and possibly even support from the Pakistani government," he wrote.

"This is highly problematic given the Haqqani's clear involvement in killing the very Afghan army and police we have worked for years to train," Corker added.

Asked about Corker's charges, Toner said: "We believe US security assistance to Pakistan actually contributes to their counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations."

"These operations reduce the ability of militants to use Pakistani territory as a safe haven to carry out terrorist attacks and as a base of support for the insurgency in Afghanistan," he said.

"So we believe these operations are in the interests of both Pakistan and the United States and in the interests of the region more broadly," Toner said.

Asked how many fewer US personnel had been killed inside Afghanistan by terrorist groups because of US assistance to Pakistani forces, Toner said he did not have the figures "in front of me."

"But no country in the region has been more touched by terrorism than Pakistan," he claimed. "We believe it's in our vital national security interests to support Pakistan in carrying out its efforts to destroy these terrorist networks."

Describing Pakistan as "an important partner in the region in achieving a stable and secure Afghanistan," the spokesperson said, the US "would welcome Pakistan's efforts to support Afghan-led reconciliation talks, for example."

Pakistan, he said, had carried out "multiple operations against some of these terrorist networks that are operating on their soil.

"We believe that destroying, eliminating those networks is in our national security interests, as well as the security interests of the region," Toner said.

Meanwhile, the Pakistani Embassy in Washington Thursday denied Corker's charge and criticised it as unfounded and ill-advised.

"Insinuations of facilitating the destabilizing role of Haqqani network in Afghanistan in any way are indeed unfortunate," embassy spokesman Nadeem Hotiana told Foreign Policy magazine.

Corker, following a recent trip to Afghanistan, said he would shelve the funding needed to finance the F-16 deal. However, he pledged to lift his hold on the sale of the warplanes itself.

"If they wish to purchase this military equipment, they will do so without a subsidy from the American taxpayer," Corker was quoted as saying in the letter by FP.

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