

US concerned about release of Pakistani scientist

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WASHINGTON— President Barack Obama wants assurances from Pakistani leaders that a newly freed scientist accused of leaking atomic secrets isn't involved in any of the activity that led to his arrest, the White House said Friday.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton also expressed concern about the release of Abdul Qadeer Khan from de facto house arrest. In the House, Rep. Howard Berman, D-Calif., the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, suggested that U.S. aid to Pakistan could suffer because of the development.

Khan helped Pakistan develop nuclear weapons and allegedly leaked atomic secrets to North Korea, Iran and Libya. He was freed Friday by a high court ruling.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said Obama wants assurances that Khan "is not involved or engaged in any of the activity that resulted in his house arrest earlier."

Berman said he is "deeply concerned" that Pakistan may be giving Khan "license to resume, perhaps directly, his past actions to aid, abet and profit from the spread of nuclear weapons."

Congress, Berman said, will take Pakistan's refusal to allow U.S. officials to interview Khan "into account as we review and create legislation on U.S.-Pakistan relations and the circumstances under which U.S. assistance is provided to Islamabad."

It may prove difficult for the United States to punish Pakistan. The largest point of U.S. leverage is the more than \$10 billion in aid Washington has shipped to Islamabad since 2001.

Cutting funds probably would damage a fragile, U.S.-backed government already facing high inflation, a sinking currency, widespread poverty and a violent insurgency by Islamic militants. Washington relies on the nuclear-armed country to fight extremists operating along the Afghan-Pakistan border.

"The question is whether or not it's possible to express our displeasure without hurting ourselves," said Robert Hathaway, director of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Asia program. "We obviously don't want to shoot ourselves in the foot."

Khan is lionized for his role in making Pakistan the world's only Muslim nuclear power. The United States, however, worries that Iran and other nations have used Pakistani technical knowledge in pursuit of nuclear arms.

U.S.-Pakistan ties are delicate. The once-ruling Taliban are resurgent in Afghanistan, and the United States is pushing Pakistan to eliminate militant bases on its side of the border even as it conducts missile strikes against suspected extremists in Pakistan.

CIA spokesman George Little called Khan "one of the most dangerous proliferators in history" and praised the disruption of his smuggling network as "a genuine intelligence success."