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US Senators blast 'dysfunctional' diplomats in Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, June 23, 2010 (AFP) - President Barack Obama must overhaul the "completely dysfunctional" civilian side of US-led efforts in Afghanistan or risk losing the high-stakes conflict, three hawkish US Senators said Wednesday.

Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, joined by Independent Senator Joe Lieberman, stopped just shy of explicitly urging Obama to replace Ambassador Karl Eikenberry but had harsh words for US diplomacy in Kabul.

"The civilian side is, in my view, completely dysfunctional. The relationship between the civilian leadership and (Afghan) President (Hamid) Karzai has to be changed and repaired," said Graham.

"I would urge the president to look at this as a chance to put new people on the ground without old baggage. And if we don't change quickly, we're going to lose a war we can't afford to lose," warned Graham.

Graham and his colleagues warmly praised Obama's decision to replace General Stanley McChrystal with General David Petraeus, but cautioned that diplomatic failures could hamstring his efforts to manage the increasingly unpopular war.

McCain suggested that Obama bring back veteran diplomat Ryan Crocker, who was ambassador to Baghdad when he and Petraeus enacted the "surge" strategy credited in Washington with bringing Iraq back from the brink of civil war.

"We might suggest that a consideration be given to reuniting the Crocker-Petraeus team, although I'm sure that Ambassador Crocker will never forgive me for saying that, since he's enjoying his retirement," McCain said with a chuckle.

"There is discontent -- or let me say, there is a lack of coordination and teamwork -- between the military and civilian side, both at the embassy and other areas, in Afghanistan that needs to be repaired," said McCain.

Lieberman took a slightly softer line, but underlined he felt "there is not the kind of unity in Afghanistan between our civilian and military leadership" that is needed to prosecute Obama's counterinsurgency strategy.

The senators sharply criticized McChrystal over a Rolling Stone magazine profile in which the general and his aides are quoted as mocking top Obama national security aides, from Vice President Joe Biden on down.

McChrystal himself is quoted as deriding US special envoy Richard Holbrooke, and as saying he felt "betrayed" by Eikenberry, who had raised pointed objections to his strategy.