

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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America Must Lead Through Engagement, President Obama Says

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — There must be continued American leadership to halt the spread of nuclear weapons, develop clean energy and advance human dignity throughout the world, President Obama says, restating his commitment to global engagement.

Speaking January 27 in his first State of the Union address, Obama told U.S. lawmakers, Cabinet members, Supreme Court justices, U.S. military officers and the American people that the United States is leading through engagement to advance “the common security and prosperity of all people.”

U.S. engagement includes taking a leadership role in fighting climate change; working to sustain a lasting global economic recovery; establishing partnerships around the world in science, education and innovation; and providing humanitarian food and medical assistance, including in the fight against HIV/AIDS, he said.

“America takes these actions because our destiny is connected to those beyond our shores. But we also do it because it is right,” Obama said.

In defense of human dignity around the world, “we stand with the girl who yearns to go to school in Afghanistan; ... we support the human rights of the women marching through the streets of Iran; and we advocate for the young man denied a job by corruption in Guinea,” he said.

The president said the threat of nuclear weapons constitutes “perhaps the greatest danger to the American people,” and his administration is pursuing a strategy to reverse their spread and to ultimately seek “a world without them.”

The United States and Russia are expected to resume negotiations on the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) in Geneva February 1. The president described the proposed pact as “the farthest-reaching arms control treaty in nearly two decades.”

The agreement is scheduled to be signed ahead of the Nuclear Security Summit that the president will host in April. Representatives of 44 countries will gather in Washington with the goal of securing “all vulnerable nuclear materials around the world in four years, so that they never fall into the hands of terrorists,” he said.

Nations such as North Korea and Iran that are pursuing nuclear weapons, in turn, are facing stronger economic

sanctions and increasing international unity against their efforts, the president said.

The president reiterated that American combat brigades will leave Iraq by the end of August, but the United States will continue to work in partnership and support with the Iraqi government and its people. In Afghanistan, he said, stepped up pressure against the Taliban and increased training of Afghan security forces will allow those forces to take the lead for their country’s security beginning in July 2011 and for American troops to begin returning home.

THE ECONOMY

Most of the president’s remarks focused on the American economy. Obama said that although the worst of the 2008 recession now has passed, the U.S. unemployment rate is at 10 percent, businesses have shut down and American home values have declined.

For many, “change has not come fast enough,” he said, and job creation will continue to be the top domestic focus in 2010.

One key sector for economic development is clean energy, and the president said that development of that sector, along with reducing pollution and mitigating climate change, will provide new jobs and spur economic growth.

This is “the right thing to do for our future,” Obama said. “The nation that leads the clean energy economy will be the nation that leads the global economy. And America must be that nation.”

In addition, the United States needs to increase its exports and aggressively seek new markets.

“If America sits on the sidelines while other nations sign trade deals, we will lose the chance to create jobs on our shores,” he said.

The president said his administration will be working in 2010 to shape the Doha round of World Trade Organization talks in order to increase trade through open markets, and “we will strengthen our trade relations in Asia and with key partners like South Korea, and Panama, and Colombia.”

Along with creating jobs and increasing trade, the president called for measures to reduce the U.S. national debt, such as freezing government spending and reforming health insurance.

Obama said his proposed three-year freeze in government spending would save about \$20 billion in 2011, but would not affect spending in certain areas, including national

security, which includes most foreign assistance.

Passage of health insurance reform legislation not only would save lives and improve the security of many Americans, but also would “bring down the deficit by as much as \$1 trillion over the next two decades,” he said.

“Don’t walk away from reform. Not now. Not when we are so close. Let us find a way to come together and finish the job for the American people,” the president said.

Obama closed by saying that democracy in a nation of 300 million citizens “can be noisy and messy and complicated.” But he urged lawmakers to “start anew” after coming through a difficult decade in order to “carry the [American] dream forward, and to strengthen our union once more.”

This year, anyone can submit a follow-up question on the president’s address and vote on others at YouTube.com/CitizenTube. Next week, the president will answer questions in a special online event, live from the White House.

U.S. Senate Confirms Ben Bernanke as Federal Reserve Chairman

By Katherine Lewis
Special Correspondent

Washington — The U.S. Senate confirmed Ben Bernanke January 28 to a second term as chairman of the Federal Reserve, a move likely to reassure world markets that an experienced hand will continue to guide the U.S. central bank and that monetary policy will remain consistent.

“We have had a leader at the Federal Reserve over the last year and a half that has virtually saved our economy from a predictable collapse,” said Senator Chris Dodd, a Connecticut Democrat and chairman of the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee, in urging his colleagues to approve Bernanke’s nomination. “To have him walk away and have the Federal Reserve without leadership at this critical moment would be beyond shameful; it would be the height of irresponsibility.”

The Federal Reserve sets interest rates and can inject liquidity into the financial system through direct loans to banks. On January 27, the Fed decided to keep interest rates at record lows.

Senators approved Bernanke in a 70-30 vote, the closest confirmation of a Fed chairman in history. Previously, Paul A. Volcker, who recently has been lauded for his actions during his tenure as Fed chief, had the narrowest margin when he was confirmed to a second term 84-16 in

1983. The Senate never has rejected a nominee to the Fed chairmanship. The economy and the financial system are still in “pretty bad shape,” said Anne Vorce, director of the fiscal policy program at the New America Foundation, a research organization. She said that politicians in recent days have wanted to “go on record and send a signal” with criticism of Bernanke. But she said Bernanke may not be getting enough credit of late. “All things considered, he has done an amazing job. He, along with a number of other people, saved us from a serious depression,” she said.

Republican senators and some Democrats criticized Bernanke for supporting the government bailout of the financial sector, particularly rescuing insurance and financial products company American International Group Inc. and buying mammoth amounts of mortgages. While many economists credit the government moves with preventing a widespread meltdown, senators expressed concern over high unemployment and continuing large bonuses financial companies are awarding to executives on Wall Street.

The Dow Jones industrial average had plunged when Bernanke’s confirmation appeared in doubt recently, but recovered as it became clear he would eventually be confirmed. “It is true that he has made mistakes, particularly during the bubble years, but it would be extremely difficult to find anyone in a position of real power around the world during that time who was free of error,” writes Douglas J. Elliott, a Brookings Institution fellow, in a recent article. “Changing chairmen at this point would bring real risks, since it would throw into doubt the assumptions of investors and business people about the likely actions of the Fed, which will be so important to the overall performance of the economy. This would not be a good time to encourage investors to sell U.S. assets and the dollar itself or businesses to freeze their investment and hiring plans.”

President George W. Bush initially named Bernanke as Fed chairman, and he was sworn in to his first term on February 1, 2006. Previously, Bernanke was chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisers in 2005 and 2006, and served on the Federal Reserve Board of Governors from 2002 to 2005. Before that, he was chairman of the Princeton University economics department and had built an academic career specializing in monetary policy and economic cycles.

Indeed, his academic background studying the Great Depression gave comfort when the financial system appeared on the verge of collapse in the fall of 2008. Time magazine named Bernanke “Person of the Year” in 2009, crediting him with rescuing the economy by blasting “trillions of new dollars” into the economy. “His creative leadership helped ensure that 2009 was a

period of weak recovery rather than catastrophic depression, and he still wields unrivaled power over our money, our jobs, our savings and our national future," wrote Time's Michael Grunwald. "The decisions he has made, and those he has yet to make, will shape the path of our prosperity, the direction of our politics and our relationship to the world," Grunwald said.

U.S. Military Helped Search-and-Rescue Efforts in Haiti

Military engineers assisted in rescue pitting hope against odds
By Jim Fisher-Thompson
Staff Writer

Washington — You have only to look at what are called "crush" injuries of earthquake victims in Haiti to realize that the flattening effect of collapsed concrete buildings leaves little chance for survival. Despite that gruesome fact, search-and-rescue (SAR) teams deployed by the U.S. military and working alongside civilian units from around the world did have some success following the January 12 disaster that killed more than 100,000 people.

Within days of the devastating earthquake U.S. military engineers and pararescue units in Operation Unified Response worked feverishly with SAR teams from the United States as well as units from Taiwan, Turkey, France, Israel and others to rescue trapped survivors, many suffering horrific crush injuries to arms and legs necessitating immediate amputation.

The 1,700 members of 43 SAR teams used 161 body-sniffing dogs and sophisticated seismic listening devices to locate and pull survivors from the rubble of collapsed structures. Six of the teams were from the United States; their 511 members came from California, Florida, New York and Virginia.

They were helped by U.S. military units that used heavy equipment to clear rubble obstructing rescue sites and assessed the stability of damaged structures.

While focusing on the restoration of essential public services like electricity and water, U.S. military engineers also had an important role to play in SAR activities, said Army Colonel Rick Kaiser, commander of the 20th Engineering Brigade.

During a January 27 conference call from Port-au-Prince, Kaiser told journalists that U.S. military engineers worked with civilian structural experts in the Army Corps of Engineers who had "tremendous experience from 9/11 ... search, rescue and recovery operations."

The collapsed sites are "extremely dangerous," Kaiser said. "If you remove the wrong beam or section of

concrete you could cause the entire remaining structure to collapse." So the U.S. engineers "leveraged the expertise" of SAR personnel by "identifying on the site ... which pieces or components [of a mass of concrete rubble] need to be removed next."

That care paid off January 19 when U.S. Air Force pararescue specialists from the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron worked with members of various rescue teams to rescue a 25-year-old woman who had been trapped in a collapsed building for seven days.

Despite the aftershocks and chaos that followed the quake, a French SAR team pulled eight survivors out of the ruins of the Montana Hotel outside Port-au-Prince, including seven Americans, within 48 hours of the disaster.

The Fairfax County, Virginia, Task Force Urban Search and Rescue Team that arrived in Haiti less than 24 hours after the disaster reported January 21 it had pulled 14 "live saves" from collapsed buildings, including a large home whose owner survived the collapse but whose family was trapped inside. Four family members were saved by the SAR team that the Haitian owner said was "sent from heaven."

According to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which is coordinating U.S. relief and rescue efforts in Haiti, as of January 26 U.S. SAR teams had rescued 47 people, while U.S. and other international teams combined had rescued 134 people.

One of the last of those rescues came January 26, when an SAR team from the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division rescued a man trapped under the rubble of a building near the Port-au-Prince Cathedral.

But now, with little chance of finding anyone alive two weeks after the disaster, search-and-rescue operations are winding down and only about 10 teams are still looking for survivors, reports USAID.

As of January 26, USAID has provided more than \$253 million for Haiti earthquake relief, with the Defense Department committing another \$126 million for supplies, medical care and transportation to Haiti.

United States Supports Fund to Reintegrate Some Afghan Taliban

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says the United States will continue aggressive military action against Taliban forces in Afghanistan, but will also

support Afghan-led efforts to reintegrate some Taliban fighters who renounce violence and al-Qaida and agree to live under the country's laws and constitution.

In London at the International Conference on Afghanistan, the United States and approximately 70 other nations approved creation of a Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund as an incentive to draw Taliban fighters from the battlefield.

"We expect that a lot of the foot soldiers on the battlefield will be leaving the Taliban because many of them ... are tired of fighting," and "we need incentives in order to both protect them and provide alternatives to them to replace the payment they received as Taliban fighters," Clinton said January 28.

The Obama administration will continue to pursue military action "very aggressively against the Taliban," especially those "trying to kill our soldiers and civilians and wreak havoc," she said. But at the same time, it wants to create "an opportunity for Taliban who choose to leave the battlefield, renounce violence, renounce al-Qaida, [and] agree to abide by the laws and constitution of Afghanistan to re-enter society."

The secretary praised Japan's "extraordinary commitment" to the fund with its announcement that it will contribute \$50 million.

According to press reports, the trust fund is expected to total about \$500 million and could be used to provide jobs and housing for returning Taliban fighters, many of whom are believed to have joined the organization to earn money rather than out of support for its religiously extremist ideology.

Although the United States does not plan to add money to the fund, Secretary Clinton said the U.S. military is currently engaged in a parallel effort using "substantial funds" to support Afghan government-led initiatives to remove insurgents from the battlefield.

"The starting premise is you don't make peace with your friends. You have to be willing to engage with your enemies if you expect to create a situation that ends an insurgency or so marginalizes the remaining insurgents that it doesn't pose a threat to the stability and security of the people," she said.

Along with providing funding, Clinton said it is also very important to guarantee protection for those who either have left or gone against the Taliban.

"You've got to realize the circumstances," she said. "There was a tribe in a village in Pakistan who decided to fight the Taliban and they were targeted with these brutal

suicide bombings, killing more than a hundred people at a volleyball match."

As the United States continues its deployment of 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, Clinton said U.S. and international forces have "upped the tempo of our military engagement and we're beginning to see some evidence of reversing the momentum of the Taliban."

The goal remains to have an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned strategy," and for coalition forces to operate under a conditions-based timetable to transfer combat roles and full security responsibility to their Afghan counterparts, Clinton said.

"July of 2011 will mark a point of transition for American troops as we take stock of where we have come with our security efforts. And we expect that there will be a portion of the country that will be under Afghan control, and we will move forward to transition out our forces as they are replaced by trained and qualified Afghan forces," she said.

However, she said, "this is not an exit strategy," and the U.S. military presence may continue "as it does in many countries, providing training, logistics, [and] intelligence."

Clinton also said there has been an increase in recruitment of young Afghan men to their country's security forces over the past two months, as well as an improvement in retention. "We've increased the pay, something that was quite noticeably lacking since the Taliban paid more than the Afghan security forces or police paid," she added.

In his opening remarks to the conference, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown called for international support behind Afghan President Hamid Karzai's plans to expand his country's security and police forces over the next two years.

Under the plan, the Afghan national army would increase to 134,000 by October 2010 and to 171,600 by October 2011. The Afghan national police would grow to 109,000 by October 2010 and to 134,000 by October 2011.

"This will bring Afghan national security forces to 300,000 in total — a presence that is far bigger than our coalition forces," Brown said, which are expected to number 135,000 in 2011.

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