

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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Obama's Proclamation on National African American History Month

President highlights initiatives to expand opportunities for all Americans

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary
February 1, 2010

NATIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY MONTH,
2010

BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF
AMERICA

A PROCLAMATION

In the centuries since African Americans first arrived on our shores, they have known the bitterness of slavery and oppression, the hope of progress, and the triumph of the American Dream. African American history is an essential thread of the American narrative that traces our Nation's enduring struggle to perfect itself. Each February, we recognize African American History Month as a moment to reflect upon how far we have come as a Nation, and what challenges remain. This year's theme, "The History of Black Economic Empowerment," calls upon us to honor the African Americans who overcame injustice and inequality to achieve financial independence and the security of self empowerment that comes with it.

Nearly 100 years after the Civil War, African Americans still faced daunting challenges and indignities. Widespread racial prejudice inhibited their opportunities, and institutional discrimination such as black codes and Jim Crow laws denied them full citizenship rights. Despite these seemingly impossible barriers, pioneering African Americans blazed trails for themselves and their children. They became skilled workers and professionals. They purchased land, and a new generation of black entrepreneurs founded banks, educational institutions, newspapers, hospitals, and businesses of all kinds.

This month, we recognize the courage and tenacity of so many hard-working Americans whose legacies are woven into the fabric of our Nation. We are heirs to their extraordinary progress. Racial prejudice is no longer the steepest barrier to opportunity for most African Americans, yet substantial obstacles remain in the remnants of past discrimination. Structural inequalities -- from disparities in education and health care to the vicious cycle of poverty -- still pose enormous hurdles for black communities across America.

Overcoming today's challenges will require the same dedication and sense of urgency that enabled past

generations of African Americans to rise above the injustices of their time. That is why my Administration is laying a new foundation for long-term economic growth that helps more than just a privileged few. We are working hard to give small businesses much-needed more credit, to slash tax breaks for companies that ship jobs overseas, and to give those same breaks to companies that create jobs here at home. We are also reinvesting in our schools and making college more affordable, because a world class education is our country's best roadmap to prosperity.

These initiatives will expand opportunities for African Americans, and for all Americans, but parents and community leaders must also be partners in this effort. We must push our children to reach for the full measure of their potential, just as the innovators who succeeded in previous generations pushed their children to achieve something greater. In the volumes of black history, much remains unwritten. Let us add our own chapter, full of progress and ambition, so that our children's children will know that we, too, did our part to erase an unjust past and build a brighter future.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, BARACK OBAMA, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim February 2010 as National African American History Month. I call upon public officials, educators, librarians, and all the people of the United States to observe this month with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this first day of February, in the year of our Lord two thousand ten, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and thirty-fourth.

BARACK OBAMA

Sudan Tops Foreign Policy Concerns in Obama YouTube Appearance

Americans also ask about Guantánamo, Afghanistan, al-Qaida
By Jeffrey Thomas
Staff Writer

Washington — While President Obama was delivering his first State of the Union address January 27, thousands of Americans went online and submitted their own questions via the popular video Web site YouTube.

People could also vote on the 11,000 questions that were sent in, and on February 1, Obama — who had not seen them in advance — responded to the questions with the highest approval ratings. His responses streamed live from the White House.

Some of the questions Obama dealt with in the first-ever presidential YouTube interview were addressed in his State of the Union speech as well: health care, jobs, the financial crisis, terrorism and Afghanistan. But the top vote-getter in terms of the percentage who thought it a good question — more than 90 percent — had to do with Sudan, a topic not addressed in his speech.

U.S. WORKING FOR LASTING PEACE AGREEMENT IN SUDAN

Asked what he would do to ensure that widespread violence does not occur in Sudan this year, the president replied, "The situation in Sudan has been heartbreaking but also extremely difficult."

He said he began working from the day he came into office to ensure that people in refugee camps in Darfur had access to water, food and other necessities of life and that nongovernmental assistance organizations could return.

"The next step in the challenge is to broker a lasting peace agreement between rebels who are still in the Darfur region and [the Sudanese] government," Obama explained, noting that his special envoy on Sudan, Scott Gration, was trying to bring together the international community "to get that deal brokered."

The aim, Obama said, is "a series of agreements that would stabilize the country, and then allow the refugees who are in Darfur to start moving back to their historic lands."

"Sadly, because of the genocide that took place earlier, a lot of those villages are now destroyed. And so thinking about how to resettle these populations in places that are viable economically, that have the resources to support populations, is a long-term development challenge that the international community is going to have to support."

The United States continues "to put pressure on the Sudanese government," Obama said. "If they are not cooperative in these efforts, then it is going to be appropriate for us to conclude that engagement doesn't work, and we're going to have to apply additional pressure on Sudan in order to achieve our objectives."

"WE ARE AT WAR AGAINST A VERY SPECIFIC GROUP"

Asked about his plans for the "war on terror" and the threat of terrorism, Obama began by re-defining who the enemy is: not an abstraction like "terror" but "a very specific group — al-Qaida and its extremist allies that have metastasized around the globe, that would attack us, attack our allies, attack bases and embassies around the

world, and most sadly, attack innocent people regardless of their backgrounds, regardless of their religions."

"We have to fight them in very concrete ways in Afghanistan and along the border regions of Pakistan where they are still holed up," Obama said. "They have spread to places like Yemen and Somalia, and we are working internationally with partners to try to limit their scope of operations and dismantle them in those regions."

"But we also have to battle them with ideas," Obama continued. "We have to ... work with the overwhelming majority of Muslims who reject senseless violence of this sort, and to work to provide different pathways and different alternatives for people expressing whatever policy differences that they may have. And I think we haven't done as good of a job on that front."

Obama also spoke of the need to help countries such as Yemen and Pakistan economically, "to make sure that young people there have opportunity."

Plans to close the detention facility at Guantánamo Bay have met "a lot of political resistance," Obama said. "It's been one of those things that's been subject to a lot of, in some cases, pretty rank politics."

Noting that Congress can constrain his ability to move the prisoners held at Guantánamo by refusing to allocate funds for new facilities, Obama said, "This is something that we've got to work through ... in Congress, but also with public opinion so that people understand that ultimately this is the right thing to do."

On energy, the president repeated his support for solar, wind and other alternative energy sources, but added that those sources could not meet the nation's energy needs. He urged Americans to look at the successful nuclear power programs in Japan and France. "We're mindful of the concerns about storage, of spent fuel, and concerns about security, but we still think [nuclear energy is] the right thing to do if we're serious about dealing with climate change."

He also called for research into clean-coal technology because countries like China and India are not going to stop using coal and the world will need the technology to deal with its use in an environmentally responsible way.

At the end of the session, Obama expressed enthusiasm for the Internet as a way of hearing from and talking with the public. "This was terrific," he said. "I hope we get a chance to do this on a more regular basis because it gives me great access to all the people out there with wonderful ideas."

United States Supports Rescue Efforts in Peru

Thousands evacuated in joint response

By Carolyn Glassman, Staff Writer

Washington — While engaged in what President Obama called “one of the largest relief efforts in our recent history” in Haiti, the United States is supporting another regional neighbor in need — Peru.

Heavy rain and mudslides have ravaged the historic area of Cusco since January 24, killing several people, washing out bridges, roads and rail links, destroying or damaging many homes, and stranding an estimated 2,000 tourists in Aguas Calientes, a small town at the base of the famed and well-visited site of Macchu Picchu. Several thousand Peruvian residents of Aguas Calientes also were cut off. The difficult canyon terrain continued flooding and poor weather hampered air rescue efforts.

Despite the challenges, up to six U.S. helicopters participated in airlift rescue efforts beginning January 26 under the direction of the Peruvian national police, army and air force. By January 29, all stranded tourists and local Peruvians who needed to depart were evacuated on U.S. and Peruvian helicopters. Rescuers gave priority to the sick and injured, children and the elderly without considering nationality.

U.S. Ambassador to Peru Michael McKinley visited the affected area to express his concern and feelings of solidarity with the people of Cusco as well as the foreign tourists in Aguas Calientes.

McKinley emphasized the efforts that the government and people of Peru were making to respond. He also commended the skill and dedication of the Peruvian and American helicopter pilots who traversed the mountainous terrain and limited landing zones to evacuate people stranded for days by flooding and mudslides.

Haitian Relief Shifting to Longer-Term Sustainability Projects

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Nearly three weeks after the January 12 earthquake hit Haiti, U.S. officials say the relief effort is shifting from search and rescue toward sustainability and economic recovery, ahead of an international donors conference that is expected to be held in March at the United Nations.

The distribution of food, water, shelter and medical assistance to the Haitian people is continuing at an ever-increasing rate. Rajiv Shah, administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), said that

as aid delivery and coordination between the Haitian government and the international community becomes more efficient and reaches more people, “we’re ramping up the relief effort” with more attention to the country’s long-term recovery.

“We’re trying, in a very focused way, to do things that are sustainable, that are appropriate and that can contribute to a strong Haitian recovery,” Shah told reporters at the State Department February 2.

In partnership with the U.N. Development Programme, the Haitian government has been directing a jobs program that employs 5,600 people per day, mostly clearing rubble. Shah said their work is instrumental in creating more space for meeting needs such as temporary housing. The program is expected to expand beyond the capital, Port-au-Prince, to provide more sources of income and to play a role in eventually transitioning the country back to a private-sector economy.

In the jobs program, “local mayors and local political leaders identify priorities in their areas,” Shah said. “On a day-to-day basis they go out and hire people, pay a minimum wage and provide that employment opportunity, and also get important public works done,” he said.

Shah said the number employed has rapidly doubled from 2,800 to 5,600. “We anticipate it will grow significantly through February,” he said. “Our goal is more every day.”

The USAID administrator said the United States has now provided more than 800,000 Haitians with food and two-week ration packages, with the rate tripling from 45,000 served per day during the beginning of the effort to the current level of more than 120,000 per day. More than 250,000 have also been served outside of Port-au-Prince, and the international community has lowered its projected target of people needing long-term food assistance from 4 million to 2 million.

Food distribution has been “remarkably effective and ... orderly,” he said, despite some isolated incidents. “I think it’s just a point to note about the Haitian population, and their commitment and resolve and resilience.”

“It is the resilience of the Haitian people that is the primary vehicle through which most relief is provided,” Shah said.

He reported that there have not been any shortages of water reported, describing the increasing daily delivery, which currently stands at 2 million liters to nearly 160 sites, as “a success story.”

The donor community has anticipated that between 240,000 and 300,000 households need temporary shelters to protect them from the elements. Shah said the international community so far has provided 70,000 of those households with plastic sheeting, shelter kits or training on how to build shelters, and has enough materials on hand to serve up to 260,000 households.

U.S. medical professionals have now seen an estimated 25,000 patients, but Shah said sanitation remains a challenge. Haitian and international officials have cooperated to establish a 51-site disease-surveillance system, and will soon begin targeted vaccination campaigns. Chlorine tablets are being handed out at water distribution sites.

ADDITIONAL U.S. ASSETS EN ROUTE

U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) announced February 1 that the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson was leaving the Haitian coast after providing nearly three weeks of support for humanitarian operations. The Vinson, which was conducting routine training off the U.S. east coast when the earthquake struck, was immediately dispatched to Haiti. The 19 helicopters on board provided some of the first means of airlifting supplies and injured people after the Vinson arrived January 15.

According to SOUTHCOM, the ship and its air wing distributed more than 1.1 million pounds of emergency aid and evacuated 435 patients. The 19 helicopters clocked in more than 1,000 hours of flying time.

Ten of the Vinson's helicopter fleet will remain on the scene for ongoing international relief efforts. The SOUTHCOM commander, U.S. Air Force General Douglas Fraser, said they are staying to ensure "the continued flow of relief supplies where needed with no impact on aid distribution."

Fraser said that although there is more work to be done in Haiti, "the delivery of medical support and relief supplies is now much better organized, achieving a far greater capacity and reaching an increasing number of Haitian people than it was just a few days ago."

There are 40 additional U.S. military helicopters providing logistics support to the relief effort. SOUTHCOM says that as of February 2, 19 U.S. Navy, U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Military Sealift Command ships are deployed off the Haitian coast, with seven more U.S. military and civilian ships en route.

U.S. Plan Would Help Afghan Women Build Better Lives

Women seen as key to a brighter future in Afghanistan

By Jane Morse

Staff Writer

Washington — Empowering women is critical to improving life in Afghanistan, and the Obama administration has unveiled a plan to do just that.

The Women's Action Plan for Afghanistan outlined by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton at the London Conference on Afghanistan on January 28 seeks to increase Afghan women's security, leadership in the public and private sectors, access to judicial institutions, education and health services, and ability to take advantage of economic opportunities, especially in the agricultural sector.

In a January 29 statement, the State Department said the Afghan government is taking "important steps" toward improving the lot of women. It has committed to enacting legislation to eradicate violence against women and has recognized the importance of women in both the Afghan National Development Strategy and the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan.

The number of girls being educated in Afghanistan has improved dramatically, with girls making up about 35 percent of the 6.2 million students now enrolled in Afghan schools. Under Taliban rule, fewer than 900,000 boys — and no girls — were enrolled.

But much more remains to be done, according to the State Department. The January 29 statement outlined "the greatest barometers of Afghanistan's progress" as a country where citizens are free from violence and coercion, where parents find jobs and quality health care more easily accessible and where girls can go to school.

Since 2001, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has repaired or built more than 670 schools and improved the qualifications of 54,000 Afghan teachers. U.S. government assistance has extended to 18 provinces and more than 43,000 children, of whom 60 percent are girls. The United States hopes to work with the Afghan government to further expand these programs.

But these programs won't do much good if girls are afraid to go to school. While extremists have destroyed schools and thrown acid on young schoolgirls, U.S. assistance programs will provide greater protection for girls' schools and health facilities. Building walls around schools, if requested, is one way. Better training for the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army is another. Bringing more women in as police officers — the United

States has helped train more than 500 female police officers since 2003 – is still another.

Violence against women remains a key challenge in Afghan society, but, as Clinton told the United Nations Security Council, violence cannot be explained away as cultural; it is criminal, and must be treated as such. The overall U.S. funding strategy has been to ensure that women's rights are protected by Afghan justice systems. It also seeks to increase women's participation in local and national politics, as well as their involvement in traditional systems of governance, such as local shuras (community leadership consultations).

Women are drivers of economic growth. According to the State Department, they typically invest up to 90 percent of their earnings in their families and communities – twice the rate for men. Getting more Afghan women into the work force – especially into agriculture, the country's main income-producing industry – is a top U.S. priority.

Because more than 80 percent of the Afghan people earn their income from agriculture, U.S. aid is aimed at increasing women's participation in that segment of the work force while increasing the productivity of the land available for farming. Women are being trained in agricultural production, animal husbandry, veterinary medicine and poultry breeding. Small loans are being made available to help Afghan women start their own businesses based on agriculture, as well as small businesses based on handicrafts and clothing.

"Women and girls, who are one of the world's greatest untapped resources," Clinton said January 29, "deserve our investment in their potential."

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