

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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U.S. Stands with Chile in Wake of Devastating Quake

President Obama extends condolences, offers aid following natural disaster

Washington — The United States will “stand with our Chilean friends,” President Obama said, assuring Chile that the United States is closely watching developments in the wake of an extremely strong earthquake and is prepared to help in whatever way it can.

The president, in a televised statement from the White House, said he had spoken with Chile’s president, Michelle Bachelet, to express the United States’ deepest condolences for Chile’s losses and offer U.S. help and support.

“Chile is a close friend and partner of the United States, and I’ve reached out to President Bachelet to let her know that we will be there for her should the Chilean people need assistance, and our hearts go out to the families who may have lost loved ones,” Obama said.

The 8.8-magnitude earthquake, among the strongest recorded by scientists, struck in the early morning hours of February 27, according to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). Early reports number quake-related deaths in the hundreds, but that figure is likely to climb given the extent of destruction already evident.

The airport in Santiago has been damaged and likely will remain closed for at least 24 hours, according to media reports. Reports from Concepción, one of the cities closest to the quake’s epicenter, were extremely limited even 12 hours after the seismic event. A large wave washed over the island of Juan Fernández, approximately 640 kilometers off the Chilean coast, shortly after the earthquake. Some bridges, highway overpasses and buildings have collapsed, despite Chile’s stringent building codes that were established to address the high risk of earthquakes.

As it did with Haiti, the United States government and U.S.-based nongovernmental organizations already are marshalling resources to assist Chile as soon as the Chilean government assesses the situation and makes its needs known.

“We are closely monitoring the situation, including the potential for a tsunami. Our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Chile, and we stand ready to help in this hour of need,” said White House press secretary Robert Gibbs February 27.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, in a separate statement issued February 27, echoed the president’s sentiments and said the United States “is coordinating

closely with senior Chilean officials on the content and timing” of U.S. assistance.

Noting she will depart February 28 on a previously scheduled trip to the region, Clinton said she will be in close contact with President Bachelet and other regional leaders on how best to help. “Our hemisphere comes together in times of crisis, and we will stand side by side with the people of Chile in this emergency,” she said.

CHILE ONE OF EARTH’S MOST SEISMICALLY ACTIVE AREAS

Coastal Chile has a history of very large earthquakes, according to the USGS, with 13 events of 7.0-magnitude or greater since 1973. The February 27 earthquake originated about 230 kilometers north of the epicenter of a May 1960 9.5-magnitude earthquake — the strongest earthquake ever recorded — that generated a tsunami felt around nearly the entire Pacific Rim. The 1960 earthquake and tsunami took 1,600 lives in Chile and another 200 in Japan, Hawaii and the Philippines.

The February 27 earthquake was centered approximately 870 kilometers south of an 8.5-magnitude earthquake in November 1922 that killed hundreds in Chile and caused severe property damage. That quake also generated a tsunami, which caused property damage as far away as Hawaii.

As aftershocks continue to be felt in Chile and neighboring nations, other nations are preparing for a possible tsunami as the force released by the offshore quake sends waves of energy across the Pacific Ocean. The United States, Japan, Russia, China, Australia, New Zealand, Polynesia and Indonesia all could feel the effects of the Chilean earthquake. Many factors, including distance and the topography of the ocean floor, affect the speed and power of a tsunami, which travels at between 640 and 800 kilometers per hour.

In the U.S. state of Hawaii, tsunami warning sirens sounded at 6 a.m. local time and residents were urged to evacuate low-lying areas even though it would be several hours before a tsunami generated by the Chilean quake could strike. U.S. Navy vessels docked in Hawaii are putting to sea to avoid damage.

Unlike the Indian Ocean in December 2004, when a deadly tsunami struck with virtually no warning, the Pacific Ocean has an extensive tsunami warning network.

In the aftermath of the 1960 Chilean earthquake, the nations of the Pacific decided to coordinate efforts to prevent such loss of life from ever occurring again in the Pacific Basin due to destructive ocean-crossing tsunamis. Under the auspices of the United Nations, the

Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission established the Intergovernmental Coordination Group for the Pacific Tsunami Warning System in 1968. Renamed the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center, it is headquartered in Hawaii.

“Once again, we’ve been reminded of the awful devastation that can come at a moment’s notice. We can’t control nature, but we can and must be prepared for disaster when it strikes,” Obama said. “In the hours ahead, we’ll continue to take every step possible to prepare our shores and protect our citizens. And we will stand with the people of Chile as they recover from this terrible tragedy.”

Secretary Clinton to Expand U.S. Engagement with Latin America

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton’s six-day, five-nation visit to Latin America is a continuation of U.S. efforts to engage the nations of the Western Hemisphere on a wide array of issues, says a senior U.S. diplomat.

Clinton will hold meetings with individual leaders and groups of leaders during her trip focusing on three sets of issues: social equity and social justice; public security and law enforcement; and democratic governance, Assistant Secretary of State Arturo Valenzuela said at a news briefing February 26. He is the assistant secretary for Western Hemisphere affairs.

“President Obama and the secretary have pledged a greater engagement with the countries of the Western Hemisphere. We’re working on a whole host of bilateral issues, with all of the countries in the region,” he said.

Clinton will travel to Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, Costa Rica and Guatemala from February 28 to March 5. The trip has been built around the inauguration of President-elect José Mujica of Uruguay in Montevideo and the Pathways to Prosperity conference in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Valenzuela said.

Obama also has designated the U.S. ambassador to Uruguay, David Nelson, and Carmen Lomellin, the U.S. permanent representative to the Organization of American States, to attend the Mujica inauguration, the State Department said.

“Uruguay is a country with a long and strong democratic tradition,” Valenzuela said, and it is the second-largest contributor to peacekeeping operations based on

population of any country in the world.

Uruguay’s contributions to Haiti, before the devastating earthquake that struck in January, were almost equivalent in terms of size to that of Brazil, illustrating its commitment to providing assistance to the nations of Latin America, he added.

Before departing for Uruguay, Clinton is scheduled to meet with Secretary-General José Miguel Insulza of the Organization of American States on February 26. Under Secretary of State William Burns is meeting with senior Brazilian officials in Brasilia before Clinton’s arrival there March 2, Valenzuela said.

Valenzuela said that a key ingredient in the secretary’s meetings with Latin American leaders is to seek common solutions to common problems and not a situation where the United States dictates to anyone.

Clinton will hold consultations with Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, with whom she holds a special relationship, and also with President-elect Sebastián Piñera, who takes office March 11, he said. In Brazil, Clinton will meet with President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Foreign Minister Celso Luiz Nunes Amorim in Brasilia and in Sao Paulo she will hold a town hall meeting with students at a local university.

Clinton will participate in the Pathways to Prosperity in the Americas conference in San Jose, Costa Rica, March 3-4. The Pathways to Prosperity initiative, which began in late 2008, is designed to link Western Hemisphere countries that are committed to democracy and open markets to promote inclusive growth, prosperity and social justice. It is designed to help countries learn from one another’s experience through the exchange of practices for spreading the benefits of economic growth.

“Pathways is one of the secretary’s signature initiatives. She has expanded this initiative that began earlier to add a whole host of other components, including such things as microcredit, ways in which you can empower women,” Valenzuela said. “It all fits in within the theme of trying to look for ways to enhance competitiveness and to address issues of social inclusion.”

Another example is corporate social responsibility in the ministerial-level talks in San Jose, he added. While in Costa Rica Clinton will hold talks with President Oscar Arias Sánchez and President-elect Laura Chinchilla.

On the final day of her trip in Guatemala, Clinton will hold meetings with Guatemalan President Álvaro Colom, and with Presidents Porfirio Lobo of Honduras, Mauricio Funes of El Salvador, Arias of Costa Rica, and Leonel Fernandez of the Dominican Republic. Valenzuela said

the full schedule is still being developed and there may be other presidents meeting with the group.

One other bilateral meeting scheduled for Clinton is a meeting with Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. The range of issues will go beyond bilateral issues, Valenzuela said, to include terrorism and Iran.

"These are questions that we will discuss with them," Valenzuela said. "We will not be discussing the Falklands issue with them. This is a matter for Argentina and for Britain."

"It is not a matter for the United States to make a judgment on," he said.

Concern in Washington over Nigerian Political Stability

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — The Obama administration has concerns over the stability of Nigeria and says that while it welcomes the return of incapacitated President Umaru Yar'Adua, the country needs a "strong and effective leader" in charge.

"What's important first and foremost is who is ... the recognized leader of Nigeria," Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs P.J. Crowley said February 26. "And right now I believe it is acting President Goodluck Jonathan."

Jonathan was designated as acting president earlier in February by the Nigerian National Assembly, in light of Yar'Adua's three-month medical absence in Saudi Arabia. Yar'Adua returned to the country February 24, but is reportedly still in ill health. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson welcomed both acting President Jonathan's designation and the return of Yar'Adua, but noted press reports on February 24 that said Yar'Adua "remains fragile and ... may not be able to fill the demands of his office."

Crowley said the United States is concerned that the return could be "an effort by his senior advisers to upset Nigeria's stability in an effort to forward their own personal interests" in the country, which is Africa's largest oil producer.

"We have tremendous concern about stability. And our message to all of the players in Nigeria is, make sure that this moves forward in a stable, constitutional and democratic way," Crowley said. "Nigeria at this point needs a strong and effective leader to ensure the stability

of the country and to manage Nigeria's many political, economic and security challenges."

A senior State Department official who asked not to be identified said U.S. diplomats in Abuja have asked Nigerian officials about Yar'Adua's condition. The president is in "dire health" and is unable to govern the country, the official said.

"We do have concerns about his movement from Saudi Arabia back into Nigeria and what some people around him might be trying to do with that," the official said, adding that that is "the basis for the warnings" that have been issued from Washington to Nigeria in recent days.

World Reflects on Women's Progress, Remaining Obstacles

Equal opportunity, health and gender-based violence remain issues

By Jane Morse
Staff Writer

Washington — In March, the world observes International Women's Day, and, in the United States, Women's History Month. And while women have made great strides in many areas where they once were marginalized, there is still much work to be done in areas including education, health and gender-based violence.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has vowed to make women's issues a centerpiece of her term as secretary. During her confirmation hearing, she spoke of her concern with the plight of women and girls, who make up the majority of the uneducated and unhealthy in the world.

"If half of the world's population remains vulnerable to economic, political, legal and social marginalization, our hope of advancing democracy and prosperity will remain in serious jeopardy," she said. "We still have a long way to go, and the United States must remain an unambiguous and unequivocal voice in support of women's rights in every country, every region, on every continent."

The Obama White House has aggressively promoted women's issues both in the United States and abroad. Early in his presidency, President Obama created a new position at the White House — now held by Lynn Rosenthal — to advise the president and vice president on domestic violence and sexual assault issues in the United States. The president also created a new position at the U.S. Department of State: ambassador-at-large for global women's issues. Melanne Verbeke, who has a long career working for the advancement of women, was appointed to that position to mobilize concrete support worldwide

for women's rights and to combat violence against women and girls in all its forms.

Clinton's focus on women's issues was underlined during her visit to Africa in 2009, where violence against women in conflict areas is a problem. There, she gave support to victims of gender-based violence and announced aid programs to help them. Later, in hailing a U.N. Security Council resolution, Clinton emphasized that violence against women should not be viewed as an unfortunate characteristic of culture, but as a criminal offense.

In addition to ensuring that women around the world are safe from gender-based violence, the State Department under Clinton is focusing on promoting women's economic opportunities – from which other rights and freedoms often follow. In remarks before Congress in October 2009, Verveer said women in many parts of the world are “the drivers of economic growth” and tend to reinvest whatever income they can command into their families and communities.

“When women are accorded their rights and afforded equal opportunities in education, health care and gainful employment, they drive social and economic progress,” Clinton made clear in a commentary last summer.

Clinton will attend several events marking International Women's Day.

On March 10 in Washington, Clinton will host the annual International Women of Courage Awards at the Department of State. Those awards, established in March 2007 by then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, recognize women around the globe who have shown exceptional courage and leadership in advocating human rights. This is the only award within the Department of State that pays tribute to outstanding women leaders worldwide. It recognizes the courage and leadership they have shown as they struggle for social justice and equal rights.

Also on March 10, Clinton will present the Global Trailblazer Award to Melinda Gates of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation at the ninth annual Vital Voices Global Leadership Awards celebration at the Kennedy Center in Washington. Vital Voices is an international, nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that promotes the participation of women in leadership roles in the political processes of their countries. Clinton helped found the Vital Voices Global Partnership in 1997 following the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing. In an impassioned speech at that U.N. conference, Clinton, who was first lady at the time, made her famous statement: “Human rights are women's rights; and women's rights are human rights.”

Since 1987, the United States has celebrated each March as National Women's History Month. But the Obama administration, in efforts spearheaded by Clinton, is clearly making women's issues a year-round concern.

“I am convinced that our daughters can contribute just as much to society as our sons,” President Obama has said. “Our common prosperity will be advanced by allowing all humanity – men and women – to reach their full potential.”

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