

American

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President Obama Lays Out Plan for U.S. Space Program.....	1
Secretary Clinton: Perpetuation of Mideast Conflict Strengthens Extremists	1
U.S. Official Says Nigeria’s Impact Reaches “Beyond its Borders”.....	2
U.S., Afghanistan Partner to Improve Local Governance, Services	3

President Obama Lays Out Plan for U.S. Space Program

By Kent Klein
VOA News

Washington — President Obama on April 15 set out his plan for the future of the U.S. space agency NASA. His vision includes an eventual manned flight to Mars, although not as soon as many Americans had hoped. The president went to Florida's Kennedy Space Center to defend his controversial proposal to change America's course in space.

Obama says he wants American space exploration to "leap into the future," and not continue on the same path. "By the mid-2030s, I believe we can send humans to orbit Mars and return them safely to Earth, and a landing on Mars will follow, and I expect to be around to see it," he said.

At the Kennedy Space Center, where U.S. space missions begin, Obama unveiled his proposal for the future of NASA beyond the end of the space shuttle program, which has only three flights remaining.

The president's plan would give private companies almost \$6 billion to build their own spacecraft and fly them to the International Space Station. It would also extend the station's life by five years.

Billions of dollars more would be put into research for developing new NASA rockets for space missions that eventually would lead to a manned mission to Mars. The plan replaces former President George W. Bush's Constellation program that would have taken astronauts back to the Moon and then to the Red Planet.

Obama says his approach will allow more and better space exploration. "We will actually reach space faster and more often under this new plan, in ways that will help us improve our technological capacity and lower our costs, which are essential for the long-term sustainability of space flight," he said.

The president has been sharply criticized by some lawmakers and former astronauts for canceling plans to return to the Moon.

In the House of Representatives, Republican Congressman Rob Bishop says scrapping lunar missions will hurt U.S. defense. "Rockets that are built to send a guy to the Moon are built by the same kinds of people who build the rockets to stop a North Korean or Iranian or some other rogue missile from coming into this country," he said.

The first man to walk on the Moon, Neil Armstrong, and other former Apollo program astronauts Jim Lovell and Eugene Cernan are also criticizing Obama's decision. In a letter to the media, the three write that "America must decide if it wishes to remain a leader in space."

Armstrong's Apollo 11 crewmate, Buzz Aldrin, supports Obama's decision. He traveled with the president on Air Force One to the appearance at Cape Canaveral.

Obama said he is 100 percent committed to NASA's mission and future, and that he wants U.S. space exploration to reach beyond the Moon. "We have been there before. Buzz has been there. There is a lot more of space to explore and a lot more to learn when we do," he said.

Obama was the first sitting president in 12 years to visit the Kennedy Space Center. He said space exploration is not a luxury, but a necessity for America.

Secretary Clinton: Perpetuation of Mideast Conflict Strengthens Extremists

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton warned that the continued failure to reach a peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority results in the continued empowerment of violent rejectionist groups such as Hamas and impedes not only those seeking a peaceful two-state resolution, but also a more hopeful and prosperous Middle East.

Speaking in Washington April 15 at the S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace, Clinton said the lack of peace threatens "Israel's long-term future ... holds back the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people, and destabilizes the region."

Improved security for Israelis through their own efforts and the work of Palestinian security forces has led some Israelis to believe "they are protected by walls and buoyed by a dynamic economy and can avoid having to do anything right now," she said.

"But that would mean continuing an impasse that not only carries tragic human costs, and denies Palestinians their legitimate aspirations, but which threatens Israel's long-term future as a secure and democratic Jewish state," Clinton said, echoing her remarks in March that the status quo is unsustainable.

She argued that it is in the interests of Israel, the region and the international community to support the Palestinian Authority's "two-track approach of pursuing a political settlement and institution building," and that

only those who “traffic in hate and violence” stand to benefit from the continued stalemate.

“In contrast to Hamas, the Palestinian Authority has staked its credibility on a path of peaceful coexistence,” the secretary said.

Hamas, in contrast, argues that a Palestinian state can be realized through violence, and its ability to exploit Palestinian frustration helps to “distract its people from its failure to govern,” Clinton said.

“The Palestinian Authority has the harder job: to convince a skeptical people that peace is not just possible, but the surest route to bettering their lives and achieving their aspirations,” she said.

“Even more than economic opportunities, that path for the Palestinians must lead to a state of their own, for the dignity that all people deserve, and the right to chart their own destiny. If [Palestinian Authority] President [Mahmoud] Abbas cannot deliver on those aspirations, there’s no doubt his support will fade and Palestinians will turn to alternatives – including Hamas. And that way leads only to more conflict,” she said.

The status quo also undermines those on both sides – and in the broader region – who are working to develop functioning institutions and accountable governments, entrepreneurs and economists who are trying to foster growth, and the civil society organizers and activists who are working for “common ground and mutual understanding,” she said.

Although “considerable work remains,” Clinton said, she praised the efforts of Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who are addressing corruption and building accountable institutions as the foundation for a future state. They are also working on other long-term infrastructure like schools, hospitals and a national health insurance program.

Palestinians in the West Bank have seen significant economic growth thanks to improved security and the rule of law, and the secretary welcomed international support and the easing of some Israeli restrictions and road blocks that helped spur the improvement.

However, Israel’s willingness to ease Palestinian access and movement “is not sufficient” to prove to Palestinians that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s embrace of a two-state solution is sincere, she said.

“We encourage Israel to continue building momentum toward a comprehensive peace by demonstrating respect for the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinians, stopping settlement activity, and addressing the humanitarian

needs in Gaza, and to refrain from unilateral statements and actions that could undermine trust or risk prejudicing the outcome of talks,” Clinton said.

The United States “cannot force” a peace solution, but believes that good-faith negotiations can lead to an outcome that will reconcile the goals of both sides.

But Clinton said “agreements between leaders are the beginning, not the end,” and that true peace will also require improving the political climate on all sides in order to mobilize popular support and counter those who advocate violence.

“Peace is possible,” Clinton said. “We will do everything we can to see it happen.”

U.S. Official Says Nigeria’s Impact Reaches “Beyond its Borders”

State’s Fitzgerald commends acting President Jonathan’s leadership

By Jim Fisher-Thompson
Staff Writer

Washington – A top State Department official says Nigeria is important to stability and progress worldwide as well in Africa, and he emphasized the closeness of U.S.-Nigeria ties.

“Nigeria is very important,” Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Africa William Fitzgerald told America.gov April 15. “On the continent, it is the most populous nation, the largest contributor of peacekeepers, the largest producer of oil, and the largest recipient of direct investment by the American private sector.

“Whether providing critical leadership in ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States], engagement in West Africa, or, from the perspective of its current seat on the U.N. Security Council, Nigeria plays a role far beyond its own borders,” the U.S. official added.

Fitzgerald made his comments the day after Nigeria’s acting president, Goodluck Jonathan, left Washington following his participation in the two-day Nuclear Security Summit during which he met with President Obama.

Reiterating commitments made by both President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to partnering with Nigerians on political and economic progress, Fitzgerald said, “We want to see a strong, democratic, prosperous Nigeria and will support Nigeria’s efforts to achieve its great potential.”

Key to that achievement, the U.S. diplomat said, was “implementing robust reform in areas such as respecting

constitutional processes, building the capacity and commitment to fight corruption, respecting human rights, promoting economic development, resolving internal conflict and achieving free and fair elections."

Fitzgerald added, "We look forward to working with Nigeria through the mechanism of our recently signed U.S.-Nigeria Binational Commission as the basis for our mutual efforts in these areas."

Before returning to Nigeria, Jonathan spoke at an event hosted by the Atlantic Council, a foreign policy-oriented nongovernmental organization that also celebrated the launch of its Ansari Africa Center headed by Nancy Walker, a former Defense Department official and founding director of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

Jonathan spoke of the need for "entrenching accountability in my country" and freeing Nigeria from "the shackles of poverty." Declaring, "We have no time to waste," he said, "We have the opportunity and obligation" to make a better life for all Nigerians free of corruption and poor governance. Nigeria stands firm for democratic elections, "not only in Nigeria, but on the rest of the continent."

Commenting on Nigeria's history of peacekeeping in West Africa and Darfur, the Nigerian leader pledged that Nigeria would maintain that role and remain "a strong actor for peace."

Asked about recent sectarian violence in Plateau state, the acting president said "economic exclusion is central to the crisis not religion." As to ongoing violence in the Delta region where militants have attacked oil and gas production facilities, he said it was driven by "a festering culture of discontent," but he added that the government should be held accountable for "the protection of life."

Addressing the corruption issue, Jonathan said, "We pay dearly for it," and added that "the government has plans to prepare a [new] generation to take over" that will govern more responsibly and transparently than in the past. Asked if he would push for more women in government, he said, "I think my Cabinet will have more [women] than in the past."

Princeton Lyman, a U.S. ambassador to Nigeria in the 1980s who attended at the Atlantic Council discussion, told America.gov that "the future stability of Nigeria impacts all of Africa. It is a major player in Africa-wide institutions like the African Union, ECOWAS, and is a major contributor to peacekeeping operations in Darfur and the West Africa area."

Nigeria's reform process is critically important to future

stability, Lyman said, adding, however, "I think President Jonathan has a very small window [of opportunity] because his term runs out in early 2011, if he remains as acting president, and so he's got to concentrate on just a few key items and electoral reform is certainly one of the big ones."

U.S., Afghanistan Partner to Improve Local Governance, Services

Washington — U.S. and Afghan leaders have signed an agreement that establishes a district delivery program to improve local governance and to improve targeting of assistance efforts, says Rajiv Shah, administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

"In accomplishing both of those objectives, it tries to take forward a real sense of [a] shared program," Shah said.

Shah and Deputy Secretary of State Jacob Lew had just returned from extended consultations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They briefed journalists April 16 at the State Department.

Shah said a policy of encouraging Afghan-led initiatives, known as the Afghan First Policy, is becoming increasingly effective in aid program assistance. That policy is a significant priority of President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

"It's an effort to really try to procure services locally and to build local Afghan institutions, as we implement the assistance package," he said.

The new district delivery program agreement, which will help the Afghan government deliver basic services in targeted districts throughout the country, was signed April 10 in Kabul by Afghan Finance Minister Omar Zakhilwal; Jalani Popal, Afghan director-general of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG); U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry; and Shah.

The Afghan-led district delivery program is designed to establish or improve the presence of the Afghan government in recently secured districts. It supports district government efforts to respond to the needs of citizens by building the government's capacity to deliver basic health, education, agricultural and judicial services.

"This event is a clear indicator of the importance of making Afghan governance visible and effective at the district level," Eikenberry said. "This is a process that will no doubt take time, but one that is necessary for the government of Afghanistan to ensure the country's long-term security and development."

"Through this agreement, the government of Afghanistan

and the United States are increasing their partnership in strengthening local and national governance, and building the capacity of Afghan leaders who maintain a strong commitment to improve the lives of Afghan citizens," Director-General Popal said after the signing.

Finance Minister Zakhilwal said, "This new initiative is important for strengthening needed capacity in local governments. By improving this capacity, local government will be enabled to deliver crucial services to the Afghan people."

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