

American

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President Obama and Russia's President Medvedev Meet to Discuss Economics, Trade

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev will hold a one-day summit June 24 where the focus will be on economic relations and international trade.

"We believe that this visit takes place at a new phase in U.S.-Russia relations," said Ben Rhodes, deputy national security adviser for strategic communications. "We believe it comes after a period when we've made very substantial progress in resetting the U.S.-Russia relationship and making concrete progress on a number of very important and substantive areas," Rhodes added during a June 22 press briefing in Washington.

"We're trying to use this visit in particular to spur people-to-people exchanges, business ties, increased investment in the Russian economy in a way that will be mutually beneficial," Rhodes said.

It will mark the seventh meeting between Obama and Medvedev in the 17 months since Obama took office.

Medvedev began his trip to the United States June 22 with a stop in California's highly regarded Silicon Valley technology hub for talks with executives at Google, Twitter, Apple and Cisco Systems and leaders at Stanford University, where he was scheduled to give a speech June 23. Part of the trip will address the need to move Russia's oil-driven manufacturing economy into high-technology and innovation industries such as those found in Silicon Valley. The state of California is also seeking to develop trade and investment missions with the Russian government.

"There will be a serious program tomorrow: I will inspect the hi-tech companies in Silicon Valley," Medvedev said at a dinner June 22 in San Francisco with California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, according to news reports. "This is very useful for us, given our plans for a similar center near Moscow."

Supporting greater growth in the Russian economy, Rhodes said, is viewed by Washington as an underdeveloped part of the U.S.-Russian relationship. "We very deliberately wanted to broaden the agenda to these economic issues because we believe that there's growth potential here," Rhodes added.

International trade, investment and innovation are expected to be key issues included in their talks. Russia has been seeking membership in the 153-nation World

Trade Organization for 17 years. It is already a member of both the Group of Eight (G8) and the Group of 20 (G20) major world economies.

Total trade between the United States and Russia — exports and imports — in 2009 was \$23.53 billion, down sharply from \$36.12 billion in 2008, largely because of the global economic recession. For the first four months of this year trade totaled \$8.5 billion. But that trade total is less than the trade between the United States and trading partners like Brazil or South Korea and well below \$366 billion in trade with China in 2009, according to the U.S. Commerce Department's Census Bureau.

"President Obama looks forward to using this next meeting with President Medvedev to explore possible avenues of greater cooperation regarding trade, investment and innovation," White House press secretary Robert Gibbs says. "In conjunction with the visit, Russian and American business leaders, as well as American and Russian civil society leaders, will be holding their own meetings in Washington."

Both presidents will also attend an event at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which is across from the White House, to meet with leading American corporations and business executives. Russia, for its part, will have to address its approach to doing business with foreign investors and its rule-of-law system, which underpins much of the global trading network.

"President Medvedev has been outspoken in certain instances about some of the reforms that need to be taken within Russia to strengthen the rule of law as it relates to business and civil society," Rhodes said.

After their meeting June 24 in Washington, both presidents will travel to Canada for the G8 and G20 summits, which run June 25-27, White House officials said.

White House officials said Obama and Medvedev also will discuss security issues that include the spread of nuclear weapons in Iran and North Korea, counterterrorism, counternarcotics, energy efficiency and climate change, emergency disaster response, outer space and the eventual ratification of the New START Treaty between the United States and Russia to reduce nuclear arms.

General Petraeus Picked to Head Military Efforts in Afghanistan

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama has named General David Petraeus, the head of the U.S. Central Command, to replace General Stanley McChrystal as commander of U.S. and NATO coalition forces in Afghanistan, following Obama's acceptance of McChrystal's resignation.

"War is bigger than any one man or woman, whether a private, a general or a president. And as difficult as it is to lose General McChrystal, I believe that it is the right decision for our national security," Obama told reporters June 23 at the White House.

Petraeus, whose current command oversees the operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq, was a full participant in the Obama administration's 2009 strategy review for Afghanistan, and supported and helped to design the current strategy of building up the capacity of Afghan governance and security while breaking the momentum of the Taliban, the president said.

"This is a change in personnel but it is not a change in policy," Obama said. Petraeus "has worked closely with the Afghan and Pakistan governments and with all our partners in the region," and he "has my full confidence," the president said.

As America's top commander in Iraq, Petraeus oversaw the successful "surge" that dramatically reduced violence in that country, setting the stage for political reform and continued progress on reconstruction and economic development. He has led U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq since October 2008, at the Central Command.

McChrystal offered to resign his command after Rolling Stone magazine published statements made by him and his staff that were critical of senior Obama administration officials; Obama said such conduct "does not meet the standard that should be set by a commanding general." Defense Secretary Robert Gates said June 22 that McChrystal had "made a significant mistake and exercised poor judgment in this case."

Obama said the U.S. military and its role in government are dependent on a strict code of conduct and respect for civilian control of the military, and that McChrystal's remarks undermined that balance and eroded the trust the president needs among his civilian and military advisers to achieve U.S. objectives in Afghanistan.

"Our democracy depends upon institutions that are stronger than individuals. That includes strict adherence to the military chain of command, and respect for civilian

control over that chain of command. And that's why, as commander in chief, I believe this decision is necessary to hold ourselves accountable to standards that are at the core of our democracy," Obama said.

In a June 23 statement, McChrystal expressed strong support for President Obama's strategy in Afghanistan, as well as a deep commitment to coalition partners and the Afghan people. "It was out of respect for this commitment — and a desire to see the mission succeed — that I tendered my resignation," he said.

The president said his decision to accept McChrystal's resignation was not made because of policy or personal differences and he paid tribute to the general's long military service and his "extraordinary dedication, his deep intelligence and his love of country."

"It saddens me to lose the service of a soldier who I've come to respect and admire," Obama said. "But the reasons that led me to this decision are the same principles that have supported the strength of our military and our nation since the founding."

Obama urged the U.S. Senate to confirm Petraeus "as swiftly as possible" and said the United States will "persist and ... persevere" in Afghanistan.

"We will not tolerate a safe haven for terrorists who want to destroy Afghan security from within and launch attacks against innocent men, women and children in our country and around the world," he said.

"We have a clear goal," Obama said. "We are going to break the Taliban's momentum. We are going to build Afghan capacity. We are going to relentlessly apply pressure on al-Qaida and its leadership, strengthening the ability of both Afghanistan and Pakistan to do the same."

Building on a Day of Protests for Rights in Iran

Groups take away lessons and benefits of greater reach

By Jeff Baron
Staff Writer

Washington — The organizers of the latest worldwide protests for human rights in Iran have some souvenirs: videos, snapshots, post cards — and more ideas on what works.

The anniversary of Iran's disputed June 2009 presidential election brought protests in nearly 90 cities outside Iran, including in the United States, as well as in the online alternate reality of Second Life.

"The geographic diversity, I thought, was phenomenal," said Firuzeh Mahmoudi of United4Iran, which

coordinated the protests. “We had South Africa to Beirut to New Zealand and Tokyo to Berlin – and Venice made an incredible video – to Dubai and Bishkek and all over the U.S. and Canada, and seven cities in Brazil and five in Mexico.”

A raucous video from Johannesburg, South Africa – made as the FIFA World Cup began – has gone viral and gotten about 50,000 hits on YouTube.

The outrage over Iran’s crackdown on peaceful demonstrators after the 2009 election inspired a large turnout at events in summer 2009. A year later, Mahmoudi said, the turnout consists of a smaller group of people dedicated to human rights who “are here to stay.”

“It’s clear that we’ve been doing this for a year and we’re more experienced as a global movement, as activists around the world,” she said. “The message was much tighter. It was a lot more thought through. The visuals were stronger, they were a lot more consistent around the world, and our specific work of focusing on one prisoner or two in each city definitely came through.”

As the coordinating group, United4Iran provided resources for the protests: postcards, photos and other materials available online to spotlight the cases of individual prisoners of conscience in Iran. But the organizers for each protest decided what made sense for a particular city. Mahmoudi said some cities’ groups decided not to focus on one or two prisoners, and some cities came up with original approaches.

“New York City had a phenomenal event, but it was slightly different,” she said. “They kind of acted out the voting, and then [the protesters] being in prison, and then them coming out and the mourning mothers being there, and so they acted out the year, and that was very powerful.”

After a year of working together, the groups and individuals in the coalition have learned to trust one another and work together, Mahmoudi said. “Someone mixed a video in Europe. The graphics come from London. And then someone in San Jose [California] cuts the video, and someone somewhere else ensures that it gets out,” she said.

With the anniversary past, Mahmoudi said the next activities will depend on what’s happening in Iran. Like other activist groups, United4Iran is aware that it must balance the need to keep its concerns before the public with the risk of wearing out its supporters. “Most people don’t do this for a living,” Mahmoudi said. The next action might be a campaign for imprisoned human rights activist Shiva Nazar Ahari, 26, she said.

But if news from Iran demands a prominent, worldwide response, she added, the network of activists in about 90 cities around the world is ready.

Water Resources Seen as Key to Afghanistan’s Growth, Development

Growth in Kabul region may lead to water shortages, survey concludes

By Howard Cincotta
Special Correspondent

Washington – Afghanistan faces a challenge in managing its water resources at a time when a combination of population growth, increased demand and climate change could lead to severe water shortages in the future, a joint U.S.-Afghan survey says.

The need for drinking water in the heavily populated Kabul Basin may increase as much as 600 percent during the next 50 years, causing more than half of the shallow wells in the region to go dry or become unusable, according to a comprehensive study led by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).

Water contamination is also an issue in a country where wastewater treatment plants are only in the planning stages.

The survey was conducted in cooperation with the Afghanistan Geological Survey and the Ministry of Energy and Water under an agreement with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

“This was a team effort with our Afghan partners – the kind of science diplomacy that builds relationships that can last decades,” Matt Larsen, USGS associate director for water, said at a briefing held June 11 at the Afghanistan Embassy in Washington.

MOUNTAINS AND ACQUIFERS

The mountains of the Hindu Kush provide 80 percent of Afghanistan’s water, with winter snow melt and runoff from glaciers feeding the country’s three major river basins – the Indus, Amu Darya and Helmand. As a result, Afghanistan can suffer from flooding in the spring, but drought and water shortages later in the year.

“Water management may be more a critical problem than water shortages,” said Said Jawad, Afghanistan’s ambassador to the United States. He said that since Afghanistan’s rivers flow across national borders, solving the problem of water shortages will require establishing “the reciprocal rights” of the countries in the region, such as Pakistan and Iran.

The resolution of the question of legal rights can lead to more investment in building dams, generating electricity and managing water resources, he added.

The USGS-Afghan survey focused on the 80-kilometer-long Kabul Basin, which includes Kabul City as well as heavily irrigated fields to the north. Existing community wells tap a relatively shallow aquifer that may shrink and ultimately disappear, according to Thomas Mack, lead scientist and chief author of the USGS report.

The report sees several trends converging to cause 60 percent or more of these shallow-water wells to go dry in coming years. Population growth and anticipated increases in per-person water usage are two factors.

Another is climate change. Air temperatures have increased in recent years, resulting in earlier snow melt in the spring and more severe water shortages later in the summer.

Afghanistan suffered from an intense drought from 1999 to 2004, Mack said, although the return of more normal precipitation in recent years has led to a general rise in water levels. Urban areas, however, are still seeing declines in the water table.

The study shows that a much deeper aquifer exists in the Kabul Basin, but its size and accessibility as a sustainable water source have not yet been determined.

DATA AND TRAINING

Researchers collected satellite data and combed through historical records that often have a 20-year gap due to war and ongoing conflict. Afghanistan, for example, maintained 165 stream gauges from 1950 to 1980, which are only now being restored, Mack said. The Afghan Geological Survey has recently installed more than 60 devices to monitor groundwater quality.

The study incorporated information from wide-ranging sources: space imagery, geologic investigation, analyses of surface and underground water, data on climate and precipitation and estimates for water usage by homes, businesses and agriculture.

The Afghan scientists and engineers who worked on the study are now training other professionals and helping expand Afghanistan's capacity to develop its water and other natural resources.

"USGS has been an invaluable asset for bringing advanced technology into Afghanistan and transferring their professional skills to build the capacity of our institutions," Jawad said.

The ambassador commented on another USGS study that calculated the value of huge mineral deposits of copper, gold, iron, cobalt and lithium in Afghanistan. The USGS estimate: more than \$1 trillion, although more exploration is needed to confirm how accessible the deposits are.

"Not only identifying, but learning how to best tap Afghanistan's natural riches is a vital step for the economic future of our country," Jawad said.

But there is a catch: developing these mineral resources will require water, and lots of it.

A New Internet Era Is Dawning Across East Africa

Internet symposium in Uganda hopes to spur connectivity, opportunity

By Charles W. Corey
Staff Writer

Washington — The recent deployment of the SEACOM broadband cable off the coast of east Africa has sparked "the dawn of a new era" in Internet communications in the region, according to one communications executive.

A June 28-29 symposium in Uganda organized by the U.S. telecom firm Verizon Communications and other planning partners is an effort to help improve East Africa's Internet links with the rest of the world and thus stimulate enhanced educational opportunities and economic growth and development across the region, the executive said.

Kathryn C. Brown, senior vice president of public policy development and corporate responsibility at Verizon, spoke with America.gov June 21 and previewed the event, which is expected to attract some 120 government, business and education representatives from the target countries of Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi. The symposium seeks to improve Internet access and applications for the region's institutions of higher education.

"There was no [easy] connectivity to East Africa prior to the installation of that underwater cable," Brown explained. "You would either have to come up from South Africa or you needed to go all the way up to Egypt in order to reach the rest of the world. Now Internet connectivity is sitting on the shores of East Africa — and for that connectivity to be deployed for folks to start to see the potential for this infrastructure development, it is going to be a real eye-opener."

Brown, who will travel to Uganda for the symposium, said that, historically, East Africa has been "one of the least-connected regions" of sub-Saharan Africa. "The Internet connectivity there is largely poor, particularly

when you get outside the international conference areas. Many African nations were forced to rely on limited, expensive satellite services alone for their international connectivity needs. This is now changing, due to the arrival of undersea cables. There is an opportunity now and a willingness on the part of the [telecom] carriers there to build out a national backbone infrastructure. The governments are very interested, the large stakeholders are very interested in having this connectivity, and Verizon, while not in East Africa right now, has had a real interest in seeing that the entire world is connected to the Internet."

If the region becomes fully integrated into the World Wide Web, Brown predicted that "the changes, frankly, will be far-reaching. As we have seen around the world, once a region becomes connected to the rest of the world, the amount of economic development is staggering. So the construction of a stable, reliable, trusted [Internet] infrastructure in the region will no doubt stimulate investment and competition in Africa" and increase foreign investment. "Fostering the innovation and expansion of the Internet allows the region to fully participate in the 21st century."

The major universities in East Africa are "hungry for connectivity," Brown said. Recalling how Verizon got involved in promoting the symposium, she said Uganda Martyrs University wanted to do "distance learning" using the Internet to teach people remotely throughout Uganda and East Africa.

The focus at the symposium, she explained, will be "the kinds of education gains that could be made if the connectivity was more robust and how that whole network of more than 50 universities all across East Africa could become the basis for network expansion all across the region."

Asked what gains could be achieved, she said: "If one looks at the program for the conference, you can see that there will be lots of deep thinking about getting ready for deeper and broader higher education in East Africa. ... Bringing students to the universities" across East Africa to access information they would not already have had access to will be "huge. You can tap all the great libraries of the world — all of the medical schools ... the law schools, the international schools. It is a phenomenal access that one gains."

Second, she said, the symposium is trying to address distance learning all over Africa so that students can be reached wherever they are.

Third, she said, professional schools such as medical and law schools want to be able to use the Internet to reach out to local clinics and law practices across the region.

"As connectivity becomes more robust, the network becomes more robust and the things that one can do on the network just multiply. We have seen that in the United States, we have seen it in Europe. And, frankly, one only needs to look at India to see what happens when a country that was considered a developing country opens its borders to the Net. There, of course, we know that there is a huge middle class that never existed before and an opening to the world that I think has been an incredible story and one we would like to see all over the world and the developing world."

Overall, the conference hopes to connect education, communication and government and spur a dialogue to move forward and use the Internet to promote greater economic growth and development across East Africa, she said.

Attendees will include the vice chancellor of Uganda Martyrs University, faculty members from Makerere University, the rector of the Islamic University of Uganda and representatives from some 25 universities from across East Africa. The chancellor of the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) will be there to speak on the link between Internet connectivity and education, and senior government officials from the region will be in attendance, along with representatives from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), which coordinates global telecom operations.

Additionally, she said, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith A. McHale will address the group. "We are just so pleased that she is going to come to speak at the conference," Brown said. Additionally, major service providers like AT&T, Google, Motorola, Qualcomm, Ericsson and Intelsat will join local operators to lend their voices and expertise to the conversation.

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