

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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President Obama U.N. Speech to Address Extreme Poverty

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama will talk about eradicating extreme global poverty when he address a high-level meeting of world leaders during the opening of the 65th U.N. General Assembly in New York, a senior U.S. diplomat says.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is convening a three-day meeting of world leaders September 20–22 to discuss progress toward achieving the U.N.-sponsored Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015. The United Nations agreed in September 2000 to achieve eight development goals by 2015 through a global partnership of nations and leading development institutions.

“Eradicating extreme poverty continues to be one of the main challenges of our time, and is a major concern of the international community,” Ban said of the development goals. “Ending this scourge will require the combined efforts of all, governments, civil society organizations and the private sector, in the context of a stronger and more effective global partnership for development.

“The Millennium Development Goals set timebound targets, by which progress in reducing income poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter and exclusion — while promoting gender equality, health, education and environmental sustainability — can be measured,” he added.

While the U.N. General Assembly opened its latest session on September 14, world leaders will begin arriving September 19 and through the remainder of the week in New York for the main session, which features speeches and high-level meetings set by the U.N. secretary-general. The meetings and addresses help set the agenda for the next year’s work and give leaders an opportunity to hold meetings on the sidelines of the sessions.

At a September 17 State Department briefing, Assistant Secretary of State Esther Brimmer said that “we will focus on core principles of leveraging innovation, investing in sustainability, tracking development outcomes and enhancing mutual accountability.” Brimmer said that the president will address the U.S. commitment to the development goals in a speech on September 22.

In addition to supporting the MDGs, Obama will also work toward improving the United Nations’ tools for peace and security as part of a U.N. Security Council summit on peacekeeping, promoting human rights and

tackling environmental changes.

“Last year, President Obama made clear his intent to lead the United States back to the multilateral table, and that intent was defined as the era of engagement,” Brimmer told reporters. In the past year, that intent has become a period of improved action, driven by U.S. priorities, framed by U.S. values and guided by the president, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and the U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Susan Rice, she added.

In addition to the focus on major U.S. agenda goals this year, the president and secretary of state will participate in a meeting on Pakistan flood relief and recovery efforts, a meeting on reconstruction in Haiti, a meeting of the Middle East Quartet for Peace, a major meeting on child food security and nutrition that is co-sponsored by Ireland, and meetings on the NATO-Russia Council, Sudan, and maternal and child health.

“The United States has been a leading voice in promoting the participation of women in conflict resolution, peacekeeping and peace building,” Brimmer said. “And we’ve been active in trying to provide for the protection of women and girls, to try to counter sexual and gender-based violence.”

Obama will address the full U.N. General Assembly on September 23. He will meet with the 10 member nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations on September 24.

Afghan Elections Offer Challenges, But Show Democratic Commitment

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Obama administration officials say the first Afghan-run parliamentary elections since 2001 will be at less risk for fraud than the August 2009 presidential elections and will benefit from having more experienced Afghan security forces, but warn that Taliban insurgents will challenge the vote, and the final results are not likely until the end of October.

“This is a challenging situation, holding an election in the context of ... a violent insurgency” in some parts of the country, said senior administration officials, who asked not to be identified. “However, I think that the fact that the Afghans are leading this election and holding it underscores their commitment to take responsibility for their own future and their commitment to building their own democracy.”

The officials spoke to reporters via teleconference September 16 and described the elections as a milestone in

President Obama's security strategy for Afghanistan.

In the September 18 vote, all 250 seats in Afghanistan's lower house of parliament, the Wolesi Jirga, will be up for election at more than 5,800 polling centers across Afghanistan's 34 districts. The election is being administered and will be conducted by the Independent Election Commission (IEC), which is a completely Afghan-run institution set up by the country's constitution. A separate Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), consisting of three commissioners appointed by Afghan President Hamid Karzai and two internationally recognized election experts, is tasked with considering and deciding any complaints over the vote, the officials said.

The officials said the IEC has put several reforms in place "that will mitigate or decrease the risk of the kind of fraud we saw last year," during Afghanistan's presidential election.

More than 6,000 individuals who were found to have been involved with fraud during that contest have been barred from participating in the September 18 election, the officials said, and electoral officials who had been overseeing provinces where there were electoral regularities have been moved to other jurisdictions for the vote "so that they were not placed under the same undue influence that perhaps they were under last fall," the officials said.

"There's also been a series of sort of administrative or mechanical checks put in place. So these have to do with the tracking and security of the paper ballots and other sensitive materials; have to do with improving the procedures for counting the votes and then reporting those votes higher, and processes in place for improving monitoring and observation," the officials said.

The Karzai government has also helped to reduce opportunities for fraud by declaring which polling stations would be open or closed for the vote on September 18. In 2009, the final list of polling sites was not established until two or three days before the election, which the officials said had opened up "opportunities for fraud on a massive scale."

The officials cautioned that there are 10 candidates contesting for each of the 250 seats, which means that "in the aftermath of the election you're going to have for every seat roughly one winner and nine losers," and they anticipated that the final results will not be available until October 30, because of the likelihood of electoral complaints that will need to be investigated and decided upon.

They also said that security will be a challenge because

Taliban insurgents "will deliberately target this electoral event," seeing the vote as a threat.

"If democracy advances, they view it as a loss. So they're at work trying to intimidate voters and candidates, and we think they'll physically try to contest the election event itself," the officials said.

But they said the Afghan national security forces, which have the lead in securing the polling sites, have gained a lot of experience over the past year and can also point to their impressive performance in July when they secured the international donors conference that was held in Kabul.

"We've got a ... well-developed Afghan national security force in the lead here," the officials said. They are "a year more mature than they were last year. And ... along with our NATO allies, we're partnered closely with these Afghan forces," they said.

American Muslims Hold Nationwide Day of Service on September 11

Muslims volunteer at churches, food pantries and walkathons around America

By M. Scott Bortot
Staff Writer

Washington — In the face of misperceptions about Islam, American Muslims marked the ninth anniversary of the September 2001 terrorist attacks by serving their fellow Americans.

In Chicago, they raised money to stop domestic violence. In New York, they promoted a toy drive for sick children. In Oklahoma City, they joined Christians and Jews to pack thousands of meals at a food bank.

"Throughout the country, Muslims went into their communities and did community service ... and prioritized helping commemorate 9/11 as a new day of national service and remembrance," said Zeenat Rahman, director of public policy for the Interfaith Youth Core.

As part of a wave of volunteerism initiated in 2009 during the United We Serve campaign, a coalition of Muslim Americans called for Muslim Serve, a day Muslims should work to improve their communities. And Americans of other faiths joined them to repudiate a threat by a Florida pastor to burn copies of the Quran and other evidence of anti-Muslim feelings.

"I felt called as a Christian to stand in solidarity with the Muslim community and in solidarity with my co-workers, because I work with Muslims, but also with my friends," said Amber Hacker, a leadership specialist at Interfaith Youth Core.

In San Francisco, Muslim volunteers at Glide Memorial Church prepared meals and served food to the homeless. Sumbul Ali-Karamali, author of *The Muslim Next Door: The Qur'an, the Media, and that Veil Thing*, organized the effort.

"I wanted to make a positive statement about American Muslims," Ali-Karamali said, adding that recent public discourse highlights misunderstandings about Islam. "I wanted to help Muslims counter fear and prejudice with a positive, nationwide action."

At the same time, Ali-Karamali wanted to honor those who had lost their lives nine years earlier.

"I also wanted to help Muslim Americans commemorate the victims of the 9/11 attacks because it is really overlooked that those were our people who died that day," she said. "Not Americans as opposed to Muslims, but they were Americans like we are Americans."

Ali-Karamali recruited about 50 people through the Islamic Cultural Center of Northern California to work at the church. The volunteers filled three shifts over the course of the day to help the homeless.

Ali-Karamali said they made about 1,200 sandwiches on her shift alone.

"It was so much fun, and we together helped feed hundreds of people," she said.

Ali-Karamali said that although the threat to burn copies of the Quran brought more attention to the day's volunteer effort, she and others in the community have been volunteering and promoting interfaith activities for years.

"One of the things that I was afraid of with this particular Muslim Serve initiative is that people would think that is the first time that Muslims had done something like this," Ali-Karamali said. "We haven't thought of this nine years after 9/11, we've been doing this for years, for decades, from before 9/11."

Nor will Muslim Serve mark the end of the volunteer efforts. Rahman said plans are in the works to coordinate community service initiatives on other occasions, including holidays.

"Moving forward, we are thinking about the other dates where we could encourage our community to do service, for example on Christmas," she said. "To have the Muslim community to partner with churches or go to soup kitchens because that is a time when service is done by many different faith-based congregations."

Zeba Iqbal, executive director of the Council for the Advancement of Muslim Professionals, said her organization participated in Stride Against Violence, a walkathon in Chicago to raise money for domestic abuse services.

"We are always looking for opportunities, and we are trying to formalize so that we are regularly scheduled as opposed to on an ad-hoc basis," Iqbal said. "We are definitely trying to do more soup kitchens and feeding the homeless, both through Muslim organizations and through non-Muslim organizations."

U.S. Official Says Pakistan Not Alone as Flood Recovery Continues

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, visited Pakistani communities that have been severely affected by flooding and vowed that Pakistan will not "face the flood destruction alone," pledging that the United States intends to increase its contributions to help the country recover.

Speaking in Multan September 16, Holbrooke said the ongoing U.S. effort to provide help to the flood victims is a "humanitarian action linking the people of our country with the people of Pakistan. We do it because it's the right thing to do — because we care for the people of Pakistan."

He added that the Obama administration, which is currently providing \$268 million in relief assistance, "intends to increase its contributions as time goes on."

According to press reports, the flooding, which was caused by monsoon rains in July, has killed more than 1,780 people, affected at least 20 million others, destroyed more than 1.8 million homes and caused up to \$43 billion in damage.

Holbrooke came to Pakistan to "hear directly from those affected by the floods and what their immediate and longer-term needs are," State Department Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs P.J. Crowley said September 16.

Holbrooke was joined in Multan by Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd. Rudd then met with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in Washington September 17. In a joint press availability with Clinton, Rudd described the situation in Pakistan as "dire."

"My simple message to the rest of the international community is that this challenge has not gone away,"

Rudd said. "The risk of waterborne diseases for the people of Pakistan is huge, and the possibility of epidemics still remains real. Therefore, the challenge for us all is to remain focused on what's happening in that country because of our common concern for our fellow members of the human family."

Clinton and Rudd will be attending a special donors conference in New York September 19 ahead of the opening of the U.N. General Assembly. Clinton said Australia's commitment to Pakistan has been "exemplary," and "now we have to make sure that the money gets to the people and alleviates the suffering that they are experiencing and helps with the reconstruction."

During Holbrooke's September 15 visit to Thatta, he said the current emergency relief phase of disaster relief eventually will transition into a reconstruction phase as aid workers begin rebuilding homes, schools, roads and businesses.

"The reconstruction phase is going to take a very long time, the devastation is enormous, the estimates of what it will cost run into tens of billions of dollars. But right now, we just have to get the people back on their feet, the waters have to recede, we have to find out how many bridges and roads have been destroyed, and we have to help Pakistan fix that problem," Holbrooke said.

In Washington, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution September 16 that expresses solidarity with Pakistan and, among other things, reaffirms "the commitment of the people of the United States to partner with the people of Pakistan to respond to the immediate crisis and build the foundations for a successful and lasting recovery."

According to a September 17 press release from the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, U.S. military aircraft supporting Pakistan's flood relief efforts now have delivered more than 3,175,000 kilograms of relief supplies and rescued more than 15,000 people since U.S. military relief flight operations began August 5 at the request of the Pakistani government.

A September 15 State Department fact sheet said that among its recent aid contributions, the Obama administration has committed \$21 million to provide seed and fertilizer to flood-affected farmers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province to help ensure a viable wheat crop for the coming winter. It is also providing \$5 million to fight malaria in flood-affected regions by prepositioning rapid testing kits and anti-malarial medications and mounting educational programs to reduce the risk of outbreak.

U.S.-based callers can help with relief efforts by texting

"FLOOD" to the number 27722, which will contribute a \$10 donation to the State Department's Pakistan Relief Fund. In addition, by texting "SWAT" to the number 50555, U.S.-based callers can make a \$10 contribution that will help the United Nations provide the Pakistani people with tents, clothing, food, drinking water and medicine. In Pakistan, callers may text FLOODS to 7111, Pakistan's active Humari Awaz ("Our Voice") cell phone network, to share information or receive flood updates.

Donors everywhere can find more information and lists of relief organizations operating in Pakistan through the State Department website.

New, Stronger El Niño Shifts from Eastern to Central Pacific

If it continues, 30-year trend could skew global seasonal weather forecasts

By Cheryl L Pellerin, Science Writer

Washington — A new kind of El Niño whose warmest surface waters are in the central-equatorial Pacific Ocean rather than in the eastern-equatorial Pacific is growing stronger and happening more often, U.S. scientists say, changing rain and drought patterns worldwide and complicating seasonal weather forecasts.

The research, by lead author Tong Lee of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California and Michael McPhaden of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory in Washington state, may help scientists better understand the relationship between climate variability caused by El Niños and climate change.

The change in El Niños and their growing intensity may be the result of a changing climate, McPhaden told *America.gov*.

"The shift of action from the eastern to the central Pacific is plausibly the result of global warming, based on an analysis of sea surface temperature data records that are admittedly limited in terms of their length [30 years] and models that are admittedly imperfect," he added. "But the two pieces of evidence together are pointing in the same direction."

Central-Pacific El Niño events were observed during two seasons in the 1990s and three seasons over the past decade, most recently 2009-2010. Many climate models predict that such events will become much more frequent under projected global warming scenarios, McPhaden said.

GLOBAL WEATHER

El Niños are the most dominant year-to-year fluctuating

pattern in Earth's climate system. They usually begin when easterly trade winds in the tropical Pacific weaken, suppressing the upward motion of cold water below the surface and letting warm water from the central Pacific shift toward the Americas.

These eastern-Pacific El Niños can influence global weather patterns, hurricanes and global temperatures in specific ways — wet winters over the southeastern United States, drought in Indonesia and Australia, for example — allowing forecasters to predict global weather patterns worldwide during an El Niño.

"Most long-range weather forecasting over North America and in fact in most places around the world is based on events that occur in the tropical Pacific," McPhaden said. "El Niño and [its cooler counterpart] La Niña are the best known, most reliable sources of information for making long-range weather forecasts," he added, "and by that I mean a few seasons in advance."

But in the early 1990s, scientists began to notice a different kind of El Niño, one whose maximum ocean warming occurred in the central- rather than the eastern-equatorial Pacific and whose strength was increasing.

"During a traditional eastern-Pacific El Niño, the west coast of South America is inundated with heavy rains and there's a lot of flooding," McPhaden said. "When the pattern shifts to the central Pacific, it's not as rainy in western South America. But there are other consequences as well."

REGIONAL CONSEQUENCES

India is one of the countries that experiences consequences from the new, stronger El Niños.

"Eighty percent of rainfall in India comes during the four summer months," McPhaden said, "so if you have a drought during that season you're in big trouble. When a traditional El Niño occurs there are rainfall deficits over India. When a central-Pacific El Niño occurs, it can lead to some really severe droughts in India, as occurred for example in 2002."

A central-Pacific El Niño also tends to reduce summer precipitation in the southwestern United States, in parts of central China and in southern Japan.

"Traditional eastern-Pacific El Niños tend to suppress hurricane formation in the Atlantic Ocean," he said, "but when the center of action shifts to the central Pacific, there's a tendency for an increase in the number of Atlantic hurricanes."

One of the big questions in climate science is how global

warming will affect El Niño, McPhaden said. "El Niño is such a consequential signal, you want to know the answer to that question." But there are many other phenomena to monitor as well.

"El Niño is the 800-pound gorilla in the zoo so you've got to get him right," he added, "but getting him right is not sufficient to do accurate seasonal forecasting in different parts of the world."

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