

American

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President Obama Tells ASEAN Leaders U.S. Needs Partnership with Asia

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington – President Obama met with all 10 leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in New York in the first such meeting held in the United States. He told them the United States needs partnerships with Asian countries to expand its economy and address global challenges such as nuclear weapons proliferation and climate change.

Speaking at the opening of the U.S.-ASEAN leaders meeting September 24, Obama said U.S. trade with ASEAN countries is expanding. One focus area is creating sustainable economic growth.

“American exports to ASEAN countries are growing twice as fast as they are to other regions, so Southeast Asia will be important to reaching my goal of doubling American exports,” he said.

Through the 21-member Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which promotes economic integration in the region, “we’re pursuing trade relationships that benefit all our countries,” Obama said. He said the United States will also “continue to support ASEAN’s goal of creating a more effective and integrated community by 2015, which would advance regional peace and stability.”

The United States also wants to focus on deepening its political and security cooperation with the region, he said.

ASEAN, formed in 1967, is made up of Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. In 2009, Obama became the first U.S. president to attend a meeting with all 10 ASEAN leaders.

The September 24 meeting is the first to take place in the United States, and it “reflects ASEAN’s growing importance and the unprecedented cooperation between ASEAN and the United States,” Obama said.

In November, the president plans to attend the APEC Leaders Meeting in Japan as well as make visits to Indonesia and to South Korea for the Group of 20 (G20) meeting. He said he has accepted ASEAN’s invitation to join the East Asia Summit, which will be held in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 2011.

“As a Pacific nation, the United States has an enormous stake in the people and the future of Asia. The region is home to some of our largest trading partners and buys

many of our exports, supporting millions of American jobs,” Obama said.

Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet, the current ASEAN chair, said through a translator that the organization’s relations with the United States “have been growing well” and play “a very important role to the security, peace and development in the region.”

“Vietnam and ASEAN always support the deepening of the relations between ASEAN and the U.S., bilaterally and multilaterally. And we want to take our relations to the next level to greater comprehensiveness and more sustenance for the peace, stability and development of our region,” Triet said.

White House officials said September 20 that Obama’s planned two-hour meeting with the ASEAN leaders was expected to be his longest while he was in New York for the 65th U.N. General Assembly.

That was so the president could explain how important he believes ASEAN and the U.S.-ASEAN relationship is to the future of Asia, Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes told reporters.

Obama places a broad importance on Asia as part of his administration’s economic agenda, Rhodes said.

“We believe very strongly that ... initiatives such as our export initiative and our efforts to promote balanced and sustainable growth through the G20 must hinge in good part on our relations with Asia,” he said.

President Obama Chastises Ahmadinejad, Challenges Iran to Change Course

By Jeff Baron and Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writers

Washington – A day after an inflammatory speech in New York by Iran’s president, President Obama is offering Iranians a scenario for better relations with the United States, an end to sanctions and a role to play from the Palestinian Territories to Afghanistan.

The common thread: Iran’s government must choose a more responsible path.

In an interview September 24 in New York with BBC Persian correspondent Bahman Kalbasi, Obama criticized the Iranian government for failing to guarantee that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only, for violating the rights of its people, for helping insurgents in Afghanistan, and for funding “terrorist activity that ensures continued conflict” between Palestinians and Israel.

Obama's harshest criticism came for Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Kalbasi asked Obama about Ahmedinejad's speech to the U.N. General Assembly in which he said most nations think the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, were staged by the United States to prop up its economy and justify its policies in the Middle East.

"It was offensive. It was hateful," Obama said. "Particularly for him to make the statement here in Manhattan, just a little north of ground zero, where families lost their loved ones, people of all faiths, all ethnicities who see this as the seminal tragedy of this generation — for him to make a statement like that was inexcusable."

Obama, who from the start of his presidency announced a policy of seeking dialogue and better relations with Iran, said his policy does not conflict with the U.S. push this year for a new round of sanctions against Iran. The sanctions, he said, "had to do with the fact that alone among signatories to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, Iran has not been able to convince the international community that its nuclear program is peaceful."

He said the sanctions aren't guaranteed to change the choices Iran has been making on its nuclear program but should "raise the costs for the government. ... We think that over time, hopefully, there's enough reflection within the Iranian government that they say to themselves, 'You know, this is not the best course for our people; this is not the best course for Iran.'"

If Iranian citizens resent the United States for hardships they face because of the sanctions, Obama said, they should look to the actions of Iranian government officials "in terms of them deciding that it's a higher priority to pursue a covert nuclear program than it is to make sure that their people have opportunity. I think they're moving down the wrong course and they continue to have the option of moving down the right course."

Obama also criticized the Iranian government's crackdown on opponents after the disputed June 2009 presidential election. "Had you seen an election that was abiding by basic rules, basic norms, in which the current regime had won, it might not have been an ideal outcome from my perspective, but we would have respected it," he said. "When we see instead a reaction in which people are imprisoned and beaten and shot and harassed, and opposition leaders are imprisoned, that, I think, violates the norms that need to be upheld all around the world."

Obama repeated his plans for Afghanistan: to begin a gradual withdrawal of U.S. and coalition troops beginning in July 2011, once Afghans have "the capacity

to secure their own country." As for Iran's public offer to assist in the effort against the Taliban, he said: "Behind the scenes, we see evidence that occasionally they have actually helped insurgents in ways that end up harming our troops. But we will continue to explore ways in which we can work with all the countries in the region, including Iran, to stabilize Afghanistan."

As for a peaceful solution between Israel and the Palestinians, the president said a peace agreement will be very difficult to achieve, but is necessary. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas began direct talks in September at Obama's invitation.

"I think that if we were able to achieve the goal of a peaceful settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, then that would change the dynamic of the region in a very positive way," Obama said. "What I think most Iranian people are looking for is that Palestinians have their right to a sovereign state. Well, there is only one way to achieve that, and that is by peace through Israel. It's not going to be achieved through violence."

"Potentially, the United States and Iran could end up working together on a whole range of issues," Obama said. "In order to do that, though, the Iranian regime has to make a decision that it is not simply maintaining power based on animosity towards the United States, based towards outrageous statements in the international community, but rather is looking for constructive ways to improve the lives of ordinary people inside of Iran."

"And if that shift in orientation takes place, I think the opportunities for tremendous progress for a great nation and a great civilization exist. If it doesn't, then [Iran's] going to continue to be isolated and it's going to continue, I think, to cause friction not just with the United States, but with the world community."

A senior U.S. administration official who spoke to reporters via teleconference said President Obama is "always interested in ways in which he can speak directly to the people of Iran."

The White House saw BBC Persian as "a good and effective platform" for the president to use because it reaches millions of Iranians through television, radio and "one of the most trafficked websites in the region," the official said. He added that the interview has given the president another opportunity to speak directly to Iranians and to "continue to underscore to the Iranian people that it is their government that has made a series of choices that have led to significant sanctions and accountability measures."

Obama previously addressed Iranians and Persian-

language speakers in March 2009 and March 2010 messages to celebrate the holiday of Nowruz.

President Obama Urges Sudanese Leaders to Embrace a Peaceful Future

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama says Sudan's leaders face a choice between war, continued isolation and international pressure, or peace that can open the way to economic and agricultural development, global integration and improved ties with the United States.

Speaking at a United Nations meeting on Sudan in New York September 24, the president said "the fate of millions of people hangs in the balance" as the country prepares to hold referendums in Southern Sudan and Abyei on January 9, 2011, that could result in those areas choosing to become independent from the government in Khartoum.

"What happens in Sudan in the days ahead may decide whether a people who have endured too much war move towards peace or slip backwards into bloodshed. And what happens in Sudan matters to all of sub-Saharan Africa, and it matters to the world," Obama said.

The international community stands united in wanting to see the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) — which ended Sudan's civil war — get fully implemented and the January 9 referendums take place peacefully and on time, he said, adding, "The will of the people of South Sudan and the region of Abyei must be respected, regardless of the outcome."

In addition, irrespective of the outcome, the international community must support development in Southern Sudan "because people there deserve the same dignity and opportunities as anyone else," the president said.

"The Sudanese people need peace," he said, addressing Vice President Ali Osman Taha and his Southern Sudanese counterpart, First Vice President Salva Kiir.

"We all know the terrible price paid by the Sudanese people the last time North and South were engulfed in war: some 2 million people killed, 2 million people; millions more left homeless; millions displaced to refugee camps, threatening to destabilize the entire region," he said.

After facing years of extraordinary hardship, there is now a chance for the Sudanese to "reap the rewards of peace," Obama said.

"It's a future where children, instead of spending the day

fetching water, can go to school and come home safe. It's a future where families, back in their homes, can once again farm the soil of their ancestors. It's a future where, because their country has been welcomed back into the community of nations, more Sudanese have the opportunity to travel, more opportunity to provide education, more opportunities for trade. It's a future where, because their economy is tied to the global economy, a woman can start a small business or a manufacturer can export his goods," he said.

Citing the transformation of former conflict zones from the Balkans and Northern Ireland to Liberia, Mozambique and Sierra Leone, the president said compromise is possible and conflicts can end where there are courageous and visionary leaders. "This is the lesson of history," he said.

"We are here because the leaders of Sudan face a choice. It's not the choice of how to move forward to give the people of Sudan the peace they deserve. We already know what needs to be done. The choice for Sudanese leaders is whether they will have the courage to walk the path," he said, adding that those willing to do so "will have a steady partner in the United States of America."

Even with the current focus on peace between Northern and Southern Sudan, Obama said the world "will not abandon the people of Darfur," which has seen a recent upsurge in violence.

The Sudanese government has pledged to improve security and living conditions in Darfur and must act on that pledge now to allow development assistance and aid workers to access the region, he said.

"Infrastructure and public services need to be improved, and those who target the innocent, be they civilians, aid workers or peacekeepers, must be held accountable," he said. Accountability for the genocide in Darfur sends a powerful message beyond Sudan that "certain behavior is simply not acceptable in this world," Obama said.

Ahead of the president's remarks, White House Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs Samantha Power told reporters September 20 that the multilateral U.N. meeting had been intended as a ministerial-level event, but that Obama had decided to participate "because this could not be a more critical time in the life of Sudan and also in the life of international efforts to ensure that these referenda go off on time and peacefully."

She added that Obama's decision had motivated other heads of state to attend, and that the meeting was an opportunity for the international community to "stand together again and send a very forceful message at a critical make-or-break time" in the run-up to the

referendums.

The U.N. meeting was meant to “show that the world is united and that the parties need to move very, very briskly and responsibly to ensure that these votes take place on time,” Power said.

Zimbabwe Transition Government Urged to Respect Human Rights

By Charles W. Corey
Staff Writer

Washington — U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson and other senior U.S. government officials told representatives of Zimbabwe’s transitional government at a meeting at the United Nations that they should speak out against human rights abuses in Zimbabwe, observe international standards of human rights and continue to make political progress that will sustain much-needed economic growth.

The U.S. delegation at the September 23 meeting also stressed that targeted U.S. sanctions on Zimbabwe will remain in place against individuals and institutions that continue to engage in or derive benefit from the undermining of democratic institutions and violations of human rights.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Susan Page described the meeting in a conference call press briefing. The U.N. meeting was also attended by Michelle Gavin, the senior director of African affairs at the National Security Council and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Daniel Baer.

Page told reporters that, during the meeting, Assistant Secretary Carson “talked a lot about human rights violations, land seizures and particularly the arrest of the women who had been peacefully protesting about the constitutional process.” Additionally, Page said, the U.S. delegation called on senior officials of the transitional government to “speak out against these types of abuses and not be silent.”

Asked about sanctions against Zimbabwe, Page said the United States rejects the claim that U.S. sanctions have had a broad effect on Zimbabwe’s economy or the lives of ordinary Zimbabweans. “The sanctions are targeted. They are targeted towards a few individuals and towards a few institutions that we believe have been responsible for the policies and the actions that have led to Zimbabwe’s economic and political decline.”

Page said the United States regularly reviews its targeted sanctions. “We remove people and institutions when we believe that they are no longer posing the same kind of

threat. But, frankly, as long as these violations of human rights, the lack of respect for civil and political rights of the people of Zimbabwe, as long as they continue, we really can’t lift the sanctions at this time because people are looking to us as if we are the problem. And we are encouraging the Zimbabweans to look at themselves and address the problems that they’ve brought upon themselves.”

Page said the targeted U.S. sanctions involve travel bans and asset freezes and affect 244 individuals and institutions or companies.

She termed the U.N. meeting “very cordial, very pleasant,” and she sought to dispel what she called the “myth” that “we have suddenly re-engaged with Zimbabwe.” Page said, “We have never stopped engaging with Zimbabwe. We have full diplomatic relations with Zimbabwe. They have an ambassador here, we have an ambassador there. We have a very robust program of assistance to the Zimbabwean people, so we have always been available to speak, to meet to try to advance our relations and we were pleased to see this meeting take place. But, again, it was hardly re-engagement. It’s continuing engagement.”

U.S. assistance to Zimbabwe last year, she said, equaled \$300 million for health services, safe drinking water, education, agriculture, social protection and a range of other essential services, which were in line with the priorities of the new Zimbabwean transitional government. An additional \$73 million of assistance was pledged by President Obama in June 2009, to combat HIV/AIDS and to further democracy and good governance.

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