

American

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President Obama Thanks Troops in Afghanistan

By MacKenzie C. Babb
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama made an unscheduled trip to Afghanistan to meet with U.S. troops stationed there and to hold brief talks with Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

White House officials said the president's December 3 visit to Bagram Airfield was mainly to thank military members stationed there during the holidays.

"At this time of year, Americans are giving thanks for all the blessings that we have. And as we begin this holiday season, there is no place that I'd rather be than be here with you," Obama said during a speech to about 4,000 troops at Bagram Airfield.

Before speaking to the troops, Obama awarded five Purple Hearts to wounded service-members during a visit to the base hospital. He also met with Karl Eikenberry, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, and Army General David Petraeus, the top commander in Afghanistan.

Obama later spoke with Karzai by phone. He was scheduled to travel to Kabul to meet with the Afghan leader in person, but the visit was cancelled because of bad weather.

Obama said America is "making important progress" in Afghanistan, and said efforts by the U.S. military and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force are succeeding to "break the Taliban's momentum."

Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes underscored that message.

"What we're focused on is making sure that our two governments are aligned behind the strategic objective, which, again, is breaking the Taliban's momentum, building up Afghan capacity, and undertaking a transition that both ensures that there's never a safe haven for terrorism in Afghanistan ... and that the Afghan people can control their own future," Rhodes told reporters in a briefing.

Still, Obama noted, "there are going to be difficult days ahead."

In November, Obama discussed the future of U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan with Karzai. The two joined world leaders at the NATO Summit in Lisbon in agreeing to transfer security control of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, beginning in stages in 2011.

The transition is set to begin in July 2011, with a goal of completion by the end of 2014. However, Obama has made clear that U.S. forces will remain to train, assist and support their Afghan partners for as long as they are needed to keep the country, region and international community safe.

"We will never let this country serve as a safe haven for terrorists who would attack the United States of America again," he said.

Secretary Clinton in Bahrain: Iran's Nuclear Activities Threaten Mideast

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says there is "no debate" in the international community over shared concern that Iran may be developing nuclear weapons, and that Iran's neighbors view the threat even more acutely. She also urged Iran to "engage seriously" during upcoming talks in Geneva.

Speaking December 3 with Bahraini Foreign Minister Khaled bin Ahmed Al Khalifa in Manama, Clinton warned that a nuclear-armed Iran could destabilize the Middle East.

"If you're the neighbor of a country that is pursuing nuclear weapons, that is viewed in a much more threatening way than if you're a concerned country many thousands of miles away," she said.

Iran has claimed that its nuclear activities are for purely peaceful purposes, but its failure to address international concerns, including from the International Atomic Energy Agency and the United Nations Security Council, have made it subject to increased economic sanctions and isolation.

"We do not object to the peaceful use of nuclear power for generating energy," Clinton said. "Every country is entitled to that. What we object to is a pursuit of nuclear weapons that can be used to threaten and intimidate their neighbors and beyond. That is unacceptable, and it is destabilizing."

North Korea's nuclear activities have generated similar concerns in East Asia, and the secretary warned that Pyongyang and Tehran's development of nuclear arms "will spark arms races in both regions that will make both regions even more dangerous."

Foreign Minister Al Khalifa said Bahrain believes "every country in the Middle East has the right for nuclear power for peaceful use."

But, he said, "when it comes to taking that power, to developing it into a cycle for weapon grade, that is something that we can never accept, and we can never live with in this region."

Clinton said she hopes that Iran "will pursue a different path in dealing with its neighbors" as well as with its own people.

"We continue to hold open that possibility, and will look for a specific way to try to increase our coordination and cooperation, if Iran is willing to do so," she said.

The secretary told Foreign Policy magazine blogger Josh Rogin December 3 that she believes Iran agreed to attend discussions with European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton in Geneva December 6-7 due to the impact of economic sanctions.

"I don't think [Iran] ever believed that we could put together the international coalition we did for sanctions," she said. "And from all that we hear from people in this region and beyond, they're worried about the impact. And so they're returning to Geneva and we hope they are returning to negotiate."

If Iran is having difficulties, "maybe they'll be more responsive," she told Rogin, "but we won't know until we test it."

At the same time, she said, the Iranian leadership was "badly shaken" after the country's June 2009 presidential elections sparked months of protests across the country, and said its "decisionmaking apparatus was knocked off kilter," which made it more difficult to "get any action step out of them" during previous attempts to resolve the dispute over its nuclear activities.

"We have to see what attitude they bring [to Geneva]," Clinton said. She also said improved U.S.- Iranian relations would depend on Iran's response to the continued detention of American hikers Joshua Fattal and Shane Bauer, as well as the fate of Robert Levinson, "who is also in Iran in our opinion," she told Rogin.

State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns will attend "preparatory planning meetings" in Geneva December 5 ahead of the anticipated two days of talks between Ashton and Iranian representative Saeed Jalili.

Crowley said it was unlikely that Burns and Jalili would have a conversation on the margins of the meeting, but said the U.S. representative "will come to Geneva prepared to talk about the nuclear issue and any other issue that the Iranian government might raise."

"Were such an encounter to take place, I'm confident that Under Secretary Burns will again express our concern about the two hikers who remain in Iranian custody," Crowley said.

"We'll see what ... the Iranians are prepared to do," he said.

U.S.-Korean Trade Talks Concluded

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — U.S. and South Korean trade negotiators wrapped up four days of talks on a bilateral free-trade agreement held up by differences over beef and auto imports.

The chief U.S. trade official said the negotiators meeting in Maryland will return to their capitals to brief President Obama and South Korean President Lee Myung-bak on details of the revised trade pact. An announcement of the details in the revision is not expected before negotiators meet with the two presidents.

"We've made substantial progress in our discussions," U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk said December 3 at the conclusion of meetings with Korean Trade Minister Kim Jong-hoon and his team of negotiators. "It's time now for the leaders to review this progress before we move forward."

The trade ministers met in Columbia, Maryland, outside Washington. At issue is the 2007 U.S.-Korean Free Trade Agreement that was originally negotiated by the administration of former President George W. Bush. It became embroiled in congressional concerns about auto and beef trade with South Korea. The agreement was signed June 30, 2007, but has not been ratified by Congress.

Obama announced at the Group of 20 summit meeting in Toronto in June that he would try to complete modifications to the agreement before the end of the year and send it to Congress for final approval. The president met again with Lee in Seoul on the sidelines of a G20 summit in November, but talks ended before a conclusion was reached.

The presidents discussed ways to proceed with the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement and agreed to strengthen commercial ties while also pursuing efforts to remove trade barriers.

One key obstacle was a 2.5 percent tariff the United States levies on Korean-built autos. News reports published December 3 indicate South Korea agreed to accept a five-

year phase-out of the auto tariff, which is expected to open the way to the agreement's ratification.

According to the U.S. Commerce Department, South Korea is the United States' seventh-largest trading partner and eighth-largest export market. In 2009, the United States exported \$28.6 billion in goods to South Korea and imported another \$39.2 billion of products. The United States exported 7,663 cars and light trucks to South Korea last year while importing 476,857 from South Korea.

The trade talks were led by Kirk and Kim and also included Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, Ford Motor Company Chief Executive Alan Mulally and officials from the United Auto Workers union.

If finally approved, the U.S.-Korean Free Trade Agreement would become the second-largest free-trade agreement after the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement with Canada and Mexico, which are the United States' largest trading partners. The United States is also attempting to complete free-trade agreements with Colombia and Panama.

White House advisers have said that expanding economic integration and trade liberalization in the Asia-Pacific region is a vital element in the United States being able to export more and to grow the domestic economy. Expanding U.S. exports is a significant part of Obama's National Export Initiative, which aims to double American exports by 2015 while lessening U.S. consumer demand as a driving force of the U.S. economy.

U.S.-China Trade Commission to Meet in Washington

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke says nations that have been overly reliant on exports to be the engines of their economic growth will benefit by pursuing policies that help boost their own consumer demand.

Locke on December 2 said the United States is doing its part to correct global imbalances by boosting domestic savings and reducing its deficit. Other nations can boost domestic activity through regulatory reforms, infrastructure investments and expanding the social safety net for its citizens, he added.

"We can no longer depend so heavily on consumers in the United States, Europe and other developed countries to be engines of global economic growth," Locke said at the U.S.-China Commercial Relationship Policy Conference held at Georgetown University in Washington.

"This approach worked well enough in the past, but it has

created major imbalances in the global economy that threaten everyone's stability and prosperity," Locke said.

The United States will facilitate global adjustments by increasing the private savings rate and increasing U.S. exports, he said.

Locke and U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk will co-host the 21st session of the U.S.-China Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade with Chinese Vice Premier Wang Qishan on December 14-15 in Washington. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack is expected to join the talks.

The joint commission was created in 1983 as a forum for addressing bilateral trade matters and promoting commercial opportunities. At the 2009 meeting in Hangzhou, China agreed to reopen its market to U.S. pork and to remove barriers for American companies to China's growing clean-energy market, Locke said.

The meeting provides an opportunity for the two economic powers to address mutual trade issues such as intellectual property rights, government procurement, and innovation policies with the goal of supporting global competitiveness, increasing U.S. exports and creating jobs in the United States, Locke said.

The United States has pursued an aggressive schedule of meetings on trade and commerce with Chinese officials this year. That has included talks President Obama held with Chinese President Hu Jintao at the Group of 20 summits in Toronto and Seoul and talks at the opening of the United Nations General Assembly in September.

Kirk said at the Georgetown conference that the joint commission meeting "is a key mechanism we have for addressing critical trade priorities with China."

Locke said that as recently as 40 years ago a commercial relationship between the United States and China barely existed, but by last year total bilateral trade in goods amounted to \$365 billion.

China was the largest supplier of U.S. goods imports in 2009 and was the third-largest market for U.S. exports in 2009, after neighbors Canada and Mexico. U.S. goods exports to China totaled \$69 billion last year, up 329 percent since 2000, the Commerce Department says.

Trade in the services sector with China totaled \$24 billion in 2009.

At the meeting later this month, U.S. and Chinese officials will review progress made by more than a dozen working groups covering a wide range of trade issues in intellectual property rights, telecommunications,

agriculture, medical devices and pharmaceuticals, and travel and tourism.

Locke said trade with China has two important components. The first is helping U.S. businesses to further develop their capacity to export, and targeting U.S. companies that are new to exporting and others that are new to the global market for ventures into markets like China.

The second component to increasing exports to China is addressing barriers to market access that prevent U.S. products and services from reaching the world's second-largest economy. Both of these measures are a primary goal of President Obama's National Export Initiative, which aims to double American exports by 2015, Locke said.

"Increased Chinese consumption of foreign products and services isn't just a quality-of-life issue – it is also of paramount importance to the global economy," Locke said.

Locke said China has made steady progress in modernizing its legal institutions and recognizing rights to ownership of private property. It has also removed import quotas and joint-venture requirements for foreign companies seeking to do business in China, reduced tariffs and improved its commercial legal regime.

"In spite of this progress, there are still significant barriers that inhibit free and fair competition," Locke said. "We would like to see more reciprocity from our partners in China and a stronger commitment to pursuing the market-opening policies that China agreed to when it originally joined the [World Trade Organization]."

The United States is working with a variety of Chinese institutions, inside and outside of the government, to implement many of the best trade practices that helped make the U.S. economy the global leader, Locke said. Each year, the joint commission has been successful in addressing specific bilateral concerns and in removing market-access barriers, he added.

“Substantial” Actions Show U.S. Commitment to Climate Change

By Karin Rives
Staff Writer

Washington – More than 190 nations, many with widely different needs and political realities at home, are trying to unite around a common global agenda at the climate conference in Mexico – not an easy task.

Nearly a week into the meetings, the U.S. delegation at

COP-16 maintains that the United States stands by its commitments from last year's Copenhagen Accord and remains prepared to move forward. Most important, they say, the United States is showing in real dollars and actions that it's taking unprecedented steps to address climate change at home and overseas.

"It is a significant change from the business-as-usual course that we had been on for the past decades, and it's that shift that we are trying to move quickly and to encourage the rest of the world to also move on," Jonathan Pershing, the U.S. deputy special envoy for climate change, told reporters December 1, the third day of the Cancún, Mexico, meeting.

When adding up the steps the Obama administration has made to reduce U.S. domestic and global greenhouse gas emissions, Pershing said, "they get us a long way toward the ultimate objective we're seeking, which is to combat the threat of climate change."

The United States has a center with daily programs and exhibits at COP-16, which is short for the 16th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) joined officials from the U.S. Treasury Department at the center December 2 to explain how U.S. assistance for developing countries is increasingly pairing economic development with environmental sustainability.

CLIMATE INVESTMENTS OVERSEAS TRIPLE IN 2010

In northwestern Kenya, for example, USAID's Africa infrastructure program supports the development of a 300-megawatt wind power project that could eventually meet 25 percent of the country's electricity needs. The \$620 million Lake Turkana Wind Project potentially can displace 650,000 tons of annual carbon dioxide emissions while creating hundreds of new jobs.

USAID is also providing financial assistance for a new, 1.2-megawatt biomass cogeneration plant in the Philippines. The power station will eventually provide income for at least 700 farming families charged with managing 1,700 hectares of biomass forest that will provide fuel for the plant.

The goal is to build local technology know-how so such projects can multiply and grow in size, said Maura O'Neill, USAID's chief innovation officer. "We're trying to put systems in place that can be scaled up and be sustained," she told the audience at the U.S. Center.

The United States spent \$1.7 billion in fiscal year 2010 on so-called fast-start climate assistance for developing

countries. That's three times what was allocated the year before, and a tenfold increase in money spent on climate adaptation projects in poor countries, Pershing said.

REDD+ FUNDING: TROPICAL FORESTS PRIORITIZED

The nonbinding Copenhagen Accord that the United States and several other leading economies crafted near the end of last year's climate meeting called for developed countries to spend \$30 billion in immediate climate change-related aid to developing countries. Developing countries are expected to carry the brunt of the climate disruptions and many are already experiencing extreme weather events that may be tied to human-made climate change.

Under the Copenhagen Accord, the United States also teamed up with Australia, France, Japan, Norway and the United Kingdom to raise \$3.5 billion to combat deforestation in developing countries. The Amazon, the Congo basin and Indonesia are priority areas, O'Neill said.

President Obama and Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono announced an expansion of the U.S.-Indonesia Partnership on Climate Change and Clean Energy in early November that includes tens of millions of dollars in forest projects, including assistance for Indonesia's REDD+, a program under the auspices of the United Nations to reduce emissions from logging and forest degradation.

17 PERCENT GOAL STANDS

U.S. officials fielded many questions from international reporters wanting to know whether the United States will be able to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020, a target Obama has set.

After Congress' inability to pass a climate change bill during the first years of the Obama administration and the recent election of more lawmakers who say they will not support such legislation, there is concern that the United States may turn its back on global efforts to lower emissions.

U.S. officials have stated repeatedly that there are venues other than legislation to address greenhouse emissions, and that the administration is working with federal agencies to get the job done.

Examples include new fuel-efficiency standards for vehicles and for factories. The federal government, the largest U.S. employer, is also taking steps to reduce its carbon footprint

"There is an enormous amount going on in the U.S. and

... people should be very clear about the depth of those actions," Pershing said this week. "People, I think, often don't have the kind of insight into what's going on because they're coming from other countries and don't have easy access. We are trying to make some of that information more public because it's very, very substantial."

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