

American

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President Obama Announces Support for U.N. Measure on Indigenous Rights

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington – In what the State Department describes as “an important and meaningful change” in U.S. policy, President Obama announced that the United States is lending its support to the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and told a gathering of Native Americans that he hopes “we are seeing a turning point in the relationship between our nations.”

Speaking at the White House Tribal Nations Conference in Washington December 16, Obama said his administration began reviewing its position on the measure in April and “today I can announce that the United States is lending its support to this declaration.”

The declaration, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 2007, seeks to protect the rights of more than 370 million native peoples around the world by setting standards to fight discrimination, promote their human rights and affirm the rights of indigenous peoples to maintain their traditions, institutions and cultures.

“The aspirations it affirms – including the respect for the institutions and rich cultures of Native peoples – are one we must always seek to fulfill,” Obama said.

The president told Native Americans that he hopes “we are seeing a turning point in the relationship between our nations,” with an end to their facing an implicit choice between abandoning their heritage and accepting “a lesser lot in life.”

“We know this is a false choice. To accept it is to believe that we can’t and won’t do better. And I don’t accept that,” Obama said.

State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said December 16 that the president’s support of the declaration is “an important and meaningful change in the U.S. position.”

Although the General Assembly measure is not legally binding, “we think it carries considerable moral and political force,” Crowley said, and the Obama administration is committed to making its support meaningful.

“It is part of our ongoing work with [American] tribal leaders and their communities,” he said.

In a separate December 16 statement (PDF, 307KB), the State Department said the April decision to review the U.S. position on the U.N. declaration “came in response to

calls from many tribes, individual Native Americans, civil society, and others in the United States” who believed U.S. support for the measure “would make an important contribution to U.S. policy and practice with respect to Native American issues.”

More than 2 million Native Americans, in 565 federally recognized tribes and other indigenous communities, reside within the United States, and the president’s support “reflects the U.S. commitment to work with those tribes, individuals and communities to address the many challenges they face.”

The United States is also pleased to support the declaration’s promotion of “a new and distinct international concept of self-determination” that is specific to indigenous peoples.

“The United States is committed to serving as a model in the international community in promoting and protecting the collective rights of indigenous peoples as well as the human rights of all individuals,” the statement said.

Blake Heralds Year of “Practical Progress” for Central Asia

By Howard Cincotta
Special Correspondent

Washington – The year 2010 has been one in which U.S. efforts to intensify engagement with all five Central Asian countries have brought results across a wide range of issues, according to Robert Blake, the U.S. assistant secretary for South and Central Asian affairs. He spoke to journalists from the region in a telephone press conference on December 15.

Blake’s remarks came two weeks after Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton’s visit to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Clinton attended the summit of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Astana, Kazakhstan – the first time a former Soviet republic has hosted the trans-European security organization.

“Secretary Clinton’s trip and our sustained high-level engagement with Central Asia show the continuing United States commitment to our relations with our Central Asian partners,” Blake said, “and I can assure you that that high-level engagement will continue in 2011.”

AREAS OF PROGRESS

The centerpiece of U.S. efforts in the region this year was the inauguration of annual bilateral consultations with Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Blake said. The planned consultation with Kyrgyzstan had to be postponed when the government of Kurmanbek

Bakiyev was ousted and a new government, now headed by President Roza Otunbayeva, was created.

"These consultations have given us the opportunity to set targets for practical progress in every area of our bilateral relationship, from security to economic and commercial relations to promoting respect for human rights," Blake said.

Blake cited a number of specific areas of progress in 2010. The OSCE summit in Kazakhstan, for example, resulted in the reaffirmation of the Helsinki Principles providing rules for international behavior and protecting human rights.

Clinton welcomed Kazakhstan's leadership in nuclear nonproliferation, Blake said, pointing to the recent closure of the BN-350 reactor in Aktau where, in partnership with the United States, Kazakh authorities safely transported 100 tons of plutonium to a new, secure storage facility.

KYRGYZSTAN'S DEMOCRATIC CHOICE

Blake cited strong U.S. support for Kyrgyzstan's transition to parliamentary democracy, which included \$100 million "to help its people recover, help them meet their humanitarian needs, promote reconciliation, and move Kyrgyzstan's fragile democracy forward."

On her visit to Kyrgyzstan on December 2, Clinton praised the Otunbayeva government for its decision to carry out free elections without delay. Speaking December 2 at a town hall-style meeting in Bishkek, Clinton paid tribute to "the strong character of the Kyrgyz people, the incredible resilience that you have shown since independence, but most importantly, the path of democracy that you have chosen now."

The secretary added, "This will not be easy. You are pioneers. Look around you in the region. You are trying to do something that no one else has done."

The United States endorses full transparency in all the contracts and arrangements for fuel supplies in Kyrgyzstan, Blake said in response to a journalist's question about the Manas Transit Center. He noted that the United States hopes to establish a partnership with "a Kyrgyz entity that could supply up to 50 percent of that fuel."

AFGHANISTAN

The Central Asian nations continue to provide vital support for coalition efforts in Afghanistan, Blake said, notably the Northern Distribution Network and the recently concluded U.S.-Kazakhstan Air Transit Agreement. He highlighted other areas of support such as

scholarships for Afghan students provided by the Kazakh government, electricity supplies for Afghanistan from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and the support Uzbekistan has given to a new rail line from the Afghan border town of Hairatan to Mazar-e-Sharif.

Blake stressed that the United States is working to expand its engagement in Central Asia on a wide range of issues and is looking to make progress on all of them.

"That means not only our common interests in Afghanistan but also how to expand trade and investment, and also how to work to improve human rights and democracy throughout Central Asia," he said. "In no way are we subordinating any one of those to any of the others. They all are equally important."

TAJIKISTAN AND TURKMENISTAN

In response to a journalist's question about Russian activities in Tajikistan, Blake said, "I think one of the most important areas of progress in the last year has been the dialogue between the United States and Russia on Central Asia."

Blake said the United States continues to explore how to expand its cooperation with Tajikistan to help the country meet its challenges, including concerns on the economy, the security situation and "the narrowing of the political space that we've seen over the last several months." He noted that Clinton promised President Emomali Rahmon that she will try to visit Tajikistan in 2011.

Turkmenistan should consider a greater opening of its civil space as well, according to Blake. One such area could be relaxing registration requirements for nongovernmental organizations "so that more can operate and help contribute to economic and political development in Turkmenistan in a variety of areas."

Blake strongly endorsed the recent intergovernmental agreement on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline. "This is a project that we have long supported in principle because we believe there is a great strategic logic in trying to link the oil and gas reserves of Turkmenistan with the large and growing energy markets of South Asia," he said.

Candy Maker Mars Honored for Helping Cocoa Farmers

By Kathryn McConnell
Staff Writer

Washington — Much of the world's future craving for chocolate will be met by cocoa farmers in Ghana planting cacao trees today.

Mars Inc. – the U.S.-based company that makes Snickers, the world’s biggest-selling candy bar, and other confectionary treats – supports the Sustainable Tree Crops Program in West and Central Africa.

The program, a partnership among Mars, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Cocoa Foundation, invests in research and distribution of tree seedlings to enable farmers to grow more disease-resistant and higher-yielding trees. In Ghana, the program offers farmers a chance to attend field schools to learn about improved cultivation of cocoa and marketing practices.

For its work helping farmers to produce better yields and to adopt a forward-looking supply strategy, Mars received the Secretary of State’s Award for Corporate Excellence on December 17. The award was established by the State Department in 1999 to recognize U.S. businesses that demonstrate corporate social responsibility, innovation, exemplary practices and democratic values worldwide.

“Sustainable farm practices allow farmers to increase productivity while reducing their impact on the environment. This means less land producing more crops with fewer inputs like chemical fertilizers,” said Mars’ Andrew Pederson. The plantings also ensure the candy maker a steady supply of cocoa.

“We wanted to partner with governments and nongovernmental groups to make the cocoa sector sustainable so in the next 100 years we’ll still be making and selling chocolate and profitable cocoa farmers will be part of that,” Pederson said.

The program is boosting cocoa farmers’ living status. “As farms become more productive, farmer incomes improve. This is a win-win situation for cocoa farmers and the candy maker,” said William Guyton, president of the nonprofit World Cocoa Foundation.

Mars’ work to improve incomes of cocoa farmers in Ghana will significantly help the country’s rural areas. Agriculture accounts for more than 40 percent of Ghana’s economy, with some 600,000 farmers growing cacao trees. Ghana, a country of 24 million people, has become the world’s second largest producer of cocoa after fungal infections devastated cacao trees in Brazil and Central America in the early 1990s and production shifted to West Africa, Pederson said.

Another Mars partnership – with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the World Cocoa Foundation, other cocoa buyers and civil society groups – trains farmers in better farming techniques. The program encourages farmers to diversify their crops so they can have several

sources of income throughout the year, according to Guyton.

Mars also supports an effort with USAID and the World Cocoa Foundation to improve educational opportunities for young people living in cocoa-growing areas of Ghana.

The Award for Corporate Excellence also recognizes Mars’s leadership in the International Cocoa Initiative, a partnership of cocoa buyers, labor unions and civil society groups, to ensure that all the cocoa it buys has been produced using no child or forced labor and that farm employees work under safe conditions. “Good training and rigorous standards can raise awareness of labor issues among farmers and help to eliminate the worst forms of child labor,” Pederson said.

Cisco Recognized for Work in the Palestinian Territories, Israel

By Mark Trainer
Staff Writer

Washington – Cisco Systems Inc., an American maker of information-technology products, is building connections in Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Some of these connections join information and communications technology (ICT) companies that haven’t done business together before. Other more personal connections built along the way have the potential to join together much more. For its work strengthening the Palestinian economy and fostering engagement among Palestinian, American and Israeli businesses, Cisco received the Secretary of State’s Award for Corporate Excellence on December 17.

John Chambers, chairman and chief executive of Cisco Systems, visited the West Bank city of Ramallah in 2008. There he announced a \$10 million investment in a program to create jobs and develop the local economy in cooperation with President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority. Abbas nominated an advisory board to work with Cisco in deciding how to direct the investment. A three-year plan to jump-start the Palestinian hi-tech economy emerged from the meetings.

“We met many young entrepreneurs that had their own small companies,” said Zika Abzuk, Cisco’s senior manager for corporate social responsibility in Israel. “International companies would say, ‘Oh, no. This area is colored red on our map. We’re not going to take the risk to work in a conflict area.’ One of the first things [the entrepreneurs] asked us was to change the image of Palestine, to show the world that Palestine is open for business.”

These entrepreneurs asked why Cisco’s research and

development (R&D) teams didn't outsource work to Palestinian companies. At that time, most of Cisco's outsourced work went to India. The factors that had kept Cisco from using Palestinian companies were the first order of work. "One of the things that we discovered through the work with [Palestinian] software development companies," said Abzuk, "is that there are gaps that keep them from really being able to compete in the global market. Usually when [we] outsource work to India, everything is already there for us. The infrastructure is there, the processes are in place. We had to do due diligence of companies and background checks for the software developers, and [we had] to enable a virtual private network. Then we also did a lot of training and talks. We tried to smooth the way of the Palestinians into the Cisco workplace."

Cisco funded the project for the first year from its corporate social responsibility fund. The Cisco R&D teams selected three Palestinian companies and employed 24 engineers. By the end of that year, the R&D teams were so satisfied that they took over the cost and extended the teams to 40 engineers. "After about eight months, we could see that this was a success story, so we started telling the success story. And we started with the international companies," Abzuk said. Since Cisco began its work, other American high-tech companies — Hewlett-Packard Company (HP), Microsoft Corporation and Intel Corporation — have given contracts to Palestinian companies using the "cookbook" Cisco designed for work in the territories.

BUILDING DEEPER NETWORKS

One of the Palestinian companies Cisco works with is Exalt Technologies Ltd. Exalt employs 15 people directly for Cisco, but the benefit of the association hasn't stopped there. "You go to [mid-sized customers] and you tell them, 'We've done these projects for Cisco and HP,'" said Tareq Maayah, Exalt's chief executive, and "immediately you're respected."

The next steps in Cisco's plan involve the upcoming generations of entrepreneurs. In partnership with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Cisco is undertaking an "incubation" program for Palestinian professionals in the territories who are seeking to launch ICT businesses. "We've developed a training/capacity-building program," said Abzuk. "It's a holistic approach for a company that works with the [chief executive officer] and the management all the way down on ... how you build the talent in your team, how you invest in your employees, how you invest in marketing."

Cisco is also working with USAID to connect schools and youth clubs in the Palestinian Territories with low-cost wireless network access. Local companies will design and

build the network. Eventually, the companies will inherit the network from Cisco. In return, the local companies will continue to provide low-cost access to schools while being able to charge for additional services built on top of the network.

Cisco's work in the region has not been limited to Palestinians. For eight years, Cisco has sponsored Neta, a youth club that attracts kids— both Jewish and Israeli-Arab — from the social and geographic periphery of Israel to a digital community center. The program starts in ninth grade with intensive instruction in English, technology and team building. Since it began, it has expanded to 1,200 participants. The success of Neta has led Abzuk to export the idea under the name MYTecC, Mediterranean Youth Technology Club. MYTecC now has participants in nine countries from Morocco to Portugal. "In Israel it brought together Jews and Arabs," Abzuk said. "They kind of practiced being on the same team."

Thanks in large part to Cisco's efforts, Palestinian tech companies are expanding their work forces and reach. The new opportunities that exist in the ICT field now that weren't there three years ago have led to a 20 percent increase in students applying to engineering and computer science schools in the Palestinian Territories. Abzuk said with satisfaction, "It's become the 'in' thing to do."

United States Condemns Violence in Côte d'Ivoire

By Charles W. Corey
Staff Writer

Washington — Condemning the recent violence in Côte d'Ivoire as "egregious," a senior U.S. government official urged all Ivoirians to respect peace and the will of the people as expressed November 28 in the second round of the country's presidential election, in which Alassane Ouattara was elected as the next president.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State William Fitzgerald told America.gov in a December 17 interview, "At the end of the day, the United States is urging peace and reminds Laurent Gbagbo that any bloodshed will rest on his government, his regime, and that the will of the people must be respected."

"Overall we are deeply, deeply concerned ... because of the violence that is going on — it is egregious. There is irrefutable evidence that Gbagbo lost the election, yet refuses to give in and is shrouding himself in legalisms to defend what he calls his election victory."

Fitzgerald said Abidjan was reported to be calm December 17. "Yesterday, however, was a really rough day in which the supporters of Alassane Ouattara — the new president of Côte d'Ivoire — tried to march on the

state television and radio offices and install their own director. They were met with gunfire and with force by the government” and casualties were reported.

“Alassane Ouattara is the president of Côte d’Ivoire, Gbagbo has lost. Gbagbo needs to relinquish power, pass it to Alassane Ouattara and step aside and allow the will of the Ivorian people to be paramount,” Fitzgerald said.

“Unfortunately,” Fitzgerald said, “we are in a situation where Gbagbo is using his security forces to protect his position. It is difficult to see how the Constitutional Council can rule that Gbagbo has won. Again, the U.S. position is that any violence at this point will be blood on Laurent Gbagbo’s hands.”

Fitzgerald said: “We have not heard any public statements from Gbagbo. I don’t believe that the diplomatic corps has met with Gbagbo. He is hiding in the presidential palace, as far as we know, and is allowing his security forces to bully the people in the streets.”

“There is unanimous international feeling on who won the November 28 election – the U.N. has come out in a statement, President Obama has congratulated Alassane Ouattara for his victory, the European Union is adopting sanctions as we speak, the United States is looking into sanctions, the African Union has called on Laurent Gbagbo to step aside. The Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS] has also unanimously told Laurent Gbagbo, ‘You have lost this election. Alassane Ouattara has won and you must peacefully step aside.’”

“Really, where we are now is a standoff, a stalemate in the political crisis where Gbagbo still controls many of the levers of power, including the security forces, and that is what is keeping him in office.”

Fitzgerald said, however, that “as sanctions begin to kick in, as Gbagbo’s control over state organs continues to diminish,” things might change. The West African Economic and Monetary Union – which includes Côte d’Ivoire and seven of its neighbors in a common currency zone – “in all likelihood will cease doing business with Laurent Gbagbo and begin doing business with Alassane Ouattara, so he would actually lose control over the major accounts in Côte d’Ivoire to Alassane Ouattara.”

Fitzgerald said the Africans have taken the lead on the situation. “ECOWAS came out first with their condemnation of Gbagbo’s intent to try to remain in power. The AU followed suit.” The United States, he said, is working closely with the French and with the rest of the international community with regard to Côte d’Ivoire.

Overall, the situation in Côte d’Ivoire “concerns us deeply,” he said. “The potential for major violence, the

potential to conceivably return to civil war is there. Both sides are armed. Gbagbo has much of the security forces under his control. Dating back to the civil war in the earlier part of the decade, Ouattara has the ‘Forces Nouvelles,’ which is based in the northern part of the country.”

The United Nations is on the ground in Côte d’Ivoire, operating under the mandate to protect civilians as best they can, he said. They are also currently protecting President Ouattara and his Cabinet at the Golf Hotel. On December 16 members of his government tried to leave the Golf Hotel but were beaten back and fired upon by forces loyal to Gbagbo, Fitzgerald added.

Fitzgerald noted that the primary goal of President Obama’s Africa policy, which he laid out in Accra in 2009, is the promotion of democracy and good governance in Africa.

“The United Nations was asked to certify this election,” he said. “They have irrefutable proof that Alassane Ouattara has won the election. Democracy must prevail, and by democracy I mean the will of the people. Ivorians turned out in record numbers. Gbagbo must respect what the people voted, what the people want, which is Alassane Ouattara as president.”

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