

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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President Obama Urges Mideast Leaders to Be Proactive in Reforms

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Noting the political unrest that has spread from Tunisia to Egypt and elsewhere in the region, President Obama says young people are seeking better opportunities and ways to improve their lives. He urges governments in the region to “get out ahead of change” and respond to their peoples’ aspirations in a manner that doesn’t lead to violence.

“You can’t maintain power through coercion. At some level in any society, there has to be consent,” Obama said in a February 15 press briefing at the White House, adding that newfound abilities to mobilize people through the Internet, smart phones and other communication developments have made this fact “particularly true in this new era.”

“My belief is that, as a consequence of what’s happening in Tunisia and Egypt, governments in that region are starting to understand this. And my hope is that they can operate in a way that is responsive to this hunger for change but always do so in a way that doesn’t lead to violence,” he said.

The president said that if ordinary people see there are “pathways for them to feed their families, get a decent job, get an education, [and] aspire to a better life,” the region will achieve more stability. He urged governments to “get out ahead of change; you can’t be behind the curve.”

“The more steps these governments are taking to provide these avenues for mobility and opportunity, the more stable these countries are,” Obama said.

He also said that events in Tunisia and Egypt have shown that real change will not be achieved through terrorism and the killing of innocent people.

“It’s going to happen because people come together and apply moral force to a situation. That’s what garners international support. That’s what garners internal support. That’s how you bring about lasting change,” he said.

The history of successful transitions to democracy “have generally been ones in which peaceful protests led to dialogue, led to discussion, led to reform, and ultimately led to democracy,” he said, recalling the political upheavals in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the protests that led to Indonesia’s democratic transition in the late 1990s.

According to Obama, the role of the United States is to lend moral support to those who are seeking a better life while also understanding that the United States cannot dictate change in other countries.

“My administration’s approach is the approach that jibes with how most Americans think about this region, which is that each country is different; each country has its own traditions. America can’t dictate how they run their societies,” he said.

But there are “certain universal principles that we adhere to,” the president said, such as the belief that violence cannot be used to maintain control, that everyone in the world has the right to assemble and freely express their opinions, and that people should be allowed to share their grievances with their governments.

He urged countries in the region to “look at Egypt’s example, as opposed to Iran’s example.”

“I find it ironic that you’ve got the Iranian regime pretending to celebrate what happened in Egypt when, in fact, they have acted in direct contrast to what happened in Egypt by gunning down and beating people who were trying to express themselves peacefully in Iran,” Obama said.

He said Iranian desires for greater opportunity, free expression and other universal rights “are absolutely aspirations we support.”

As with Egypt, what happens in Iran and other countries “will be determined by the citizens of those countries,” Obama said. “What we can do is lend moral support to those who are seeking a better life for themselves.”

Internet Freedom Essential to Peace, Prosperity, Secretary Clinton Says

By Jane Morse
Staff Writer

Washington — An open, secure Internet that is accessible to all is crucial to peace and economic prosperity, says Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

“We are convinced that an open Internet fosters long-term peace, progress and prosperity,” Clinton said in a speech delivered February 15 at George Washington University in Washington. An Internet that can be blocked and censored, she said, “can cut off opportunities for peace and progress and discourage innovation and entrepreneurship.”

Efforts by repressive governments to wall off segments of the Internet are doomed to failure, Clinton said. With 2 billion people now online, not only will people find ways

to get around such obstacles, but stifling free expression on the Internet hampers economic innovation and opens the door for greater corruption.

Likening the Internet to a modern-day town square where people can mingle and share ideas, Clinton said the challenge facing the world today is how to balance transparency and free speech with security and confidentiality. Clinton acknowledged that the Internet is as easily used by extremists and all sorts of criminals as it is by human rights activists, journalists and legitimate businesses. "The Internet isn't good or bad," the secretary said. "What matters is what people who go online do there, and what principles should guide us as we come together in cyberspace."

"Our allegiance to the rule of law does not dissipate in cyberspace," she said. "Neither does our commitment to protecting civil liberties and human rights."

The freedoms of expression, assembly and association online comprise "the freedom to connect," the secretary said. "The United States supports this freedom for people everywhere, and we have called on other nations to do the same."

"There is a debate currently under way in some circles about whether the Internet is a force for liberation or repression," Clinton said. "But I think that debate is largely beside the point." The much-publicized use of the Internet and social media in recent protests by citizens in Egypt and Iran did not cause public unrest, the secretary said.

"In each case, people protested because of deep frustrations with the political and economic conditions of their lives," she said. "In both of these countries, the ways that citizens and the authorities used the Internet reflected the power of connection technologies on the one hand as an accelerant of political, social and economic change, and on the other hand as a means to stifle or extinguish that change."

"The Internet must work evenly and reliably for it to have value," Clinton said. Therefore, the United States supports "the multi-stakeholder system that governs the Internet today, which has consistently kept it up and running through all manner of interruptions across networks, borders and regions."

The United States, she said, has found strong partners in preserving an open Internet among several governments worldwide and is encouraged by the Global Network Initiative, which brings together companies, academics and nongovernmental organizations to handle issues like government censorship and the use of technologies in ways that may violate human rights.

The United States supports the use of the Internet by civil society via its "2.0 Initiative," which connects nongovernmental organizations and advocates with technology and training that supports their work. "The United States continues to help people in oppressive Internet environments get around filters, stay one step ahead of the censors, the hackers and the thugs who beat them up or imprison them for what they say online," Clinton said.

"As we look ahead, let us remember that Internet freedom isn't about any one particular activity online," Clinton said. "It's about ensuring that the Internet remains a space where activities of all kinds can take place, from grand, groundbreaking, historic campaigns to the small, ordinary acts that people engage in every day."

The struggle for Internet freedom, she said, is a struggle for human rights, human freedom and human dignity.

United States and Ukraine Fight Human Trafficking

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Saying that Ukraine is on a "remarkable journey," Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton signed a plan with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kostyantyn Gryshchenko to combat human trafficking in Ukraine.

The diplomats also agreed on a plan to assess energy resources such as shale gas to strengthen the East European nation's energy security.

It was the third meeting of the U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Partnership Commission. The Obama administration has begun using strategic partnerships and dialogues as a means for deeper consultations and commitment with select nations. They are designed to respond to the specific needs of partner nations and enhance cooperation in critical areas.

"We covered many topics, including our effective cooperation to stop nuclear proliferation, our support for Ukraine's efforts to strengthen its own democracy and the rule of law, and progress on global issues from food security to HIV/AIDS, as well as steps to help Ukraine develop its domestic energy resources and attract greater private investment, particularly from the United States," Clinton said February 15.

"Strategic partnership with the United States has become a very important part of our foreign policy, and we do rely on this strategic partnership to help us guide the shape of our statehood through the waters which are not easy that surround us in this global economic situation that changes with every year," Gryshchenko said at a joint

press briefing at the State Department.

During the commission meeting, Clinton and Gryshchenko signed a plan that aims to combat human trafficking in the Ukraine with U.S. assistance. Clinton said the recent repatriation from Ukraine to the United States of a trafficker accused of taking more than \$1 million in profits from the women he exploited is just one way the United States and Ukraine are working to end this "tragic worldwide blight."

The United States and Ukraine also signed an agreement that permits the U.S. Geological Survey to assess potential energy resources, which includes finding shale gas. Clinton said this is part of a plan launched when the secretary was in Kiev for talks about cooperative energy ventures.

In addition, Clinton said the United States has negotiated a five-year partnership to strengthen the delivery of health services to Ukrainians who have contracted HIV.

"And we're launching a five-year, \$20 million program to strengthen Ukraine's agricultural sector and help build its potential as a major contributor to global food security," Clinton told reporters.

Clinton said the United States is looking to Ukraine to continue the commitments that President Viktor Yanukovich has made on open government, strong rule of law, freedom of speech and media, and comprehensive judicial reforms in partnership with the Ukrainian people, including opposition groups and members of civil society.

The diplomats also met with a group of Ukrainian civil society leaders.

Energy Conservation Good Business for States

By Karin Rives
Staff Writer

Washington — Energy efficiency programs target what some call the "low-hanging fruit" — relatively inexpensive and effortless fixes that can have a big effect on greenhouse gas emissions.

Just ask the many American states that are pushing ahead, full-steam, with energy-savings targets for power companies. Together, these states will help the United States reduce emissions in a significant way.

The Pacific island state of Hawaii, for example, has passed a law to use energy conservation measures to reduce statewide electricity sales by 40 percent by 2030. Others use their targets to offset an expected future growth in energy consumption. A new Texas law says that energy efficiency programs in that Southwestern state must

reduce such growth by 25 percent by 2012, and by 30 percent by 2013.

The states then use incentives and rebates to encourage homeowners to replace leaky windows, spray insulation in their walls and replace aging and inefficient dishwashers, washing machines and air conditioning units. Businesses also get help with such things as replacing machines with new ones that use less energy, or with insulating commercial buildings.

In all, 26 of America's 50 states either have passed or introduced legislation requiring utilities to reduce state energy consumption by a certain percentage annually, according to the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy (ACEEE), a nonprofit group. That's up from just a handful a few years ago.

As a result, energy companies doubled their budgets between 2007 and 2009 for programs aimed at helping consumers retrofit buildings and invest in more efficient equipment and appliances. The trend continued in 2010, when utility budgets for such programs grew another 25 percent, said Michael Sciortino, an ACEEE research assistant.

"It's a clean, fast and cheap way of reducing energy waste and putting money back into consumers' pockets," he said. "It's a real economic growth strategy, and it fulfills so many different objectives."

Generation of electricity accounts for about 40 percent of greenhouse gas emissions in the United States. That means even a relatively small drop in electricity consumption has an immediate effect — not just in consumer wallets, but also in the environment.

President Obama has told the international community that U.S. emissions should be reduced by 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2017. This will require new and cleaner energy sources, along with a focused effort to reduce consumption of oil and coal.

SELL LESS POWER, GET REWARDED

The states use a mix of incentives and disincentives to prod power companies to conduct energy audits and help their customers use less energy. Historically, power companies would make more money when they sold more electricity or natural gas. Many states are now revising payment schemes for the utilities they regulate to instead reward them for being good energy stewards.

Some, such as Vermont in the northeastern United States, got an early start.

Vermont set up the nation's first arrangement with an

independent “energy efficiency provider,” an organization that provides technical assistance and financial incentives to households and businesses. The programs that Efficiency Vermont runs are paid for with a small energy efficiency charge on customers’ bills.

Between 2008 and 2011, the projected savings are expected to reduce energy demand by at least 6 percent below 2008 sales.

By leveraging purchases of products used to retrofit homes and by providing easily accessible rebates for small businesses, the program has quickly gained traction, along with a reputation outside state borders. Efficiency Vermont now gets inquiries about “how Vermont’s model can be exported to other states, and even other nations,” said George Twigg, the organization’s deputy policy director.

Other states are just now coming on board as they discover that energy conservation helps the local economy. In Arizona, for example, Democrats and Republicans recently found common ground on energy, passing some of the most ambitious regulations for saving energy in the country.

Arizona adopted rules in 2010 requiring power companies to reduce electricity demand by 20 percent by 2020, twice the goal set by most other states. The Southwestern desert state also required natural gas companies to trim demand for gas by 6 percent by 2020, most of it through energy efficiency programs.

“Energy efficiency is the cheapest, cleanest form of energy around and today’s ruling will ensure that we’re maximizing its use,” Kris Mayes, chairwoman of the Arizona agency that regulates energy providers, said when the new rules were adopted.

The new standards will help Arizona energy consumers save an estimated \$9 billion by 2030, according to Southwest Energy Efficiency Project, an energy conservation group that helped push for the changes.

States have also taken advantage of federal funds to plug holes in their own programs.

Connecticut, for example, was able to use federal dollars from the 2009 American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, the economic stimulus package, to make thousands of homes heated by oil waste less energy. The state has energy efficiency standards for providers of electricity and natural gas, but they don’t cover unregulated oil heating companies.

“States are basically saying, ‘We should get ahead of the curve here and give utilities, customers and the private

sector a signal that energy efficiency is something that we’re going to have a long-term investment in,” Sciortino said.

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