

American

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U.S. Congratulates Nigerians on Conduct of Presidential Election

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — The Obama administration says the conduct of Nigeria's April 16 presidential election was historic and shows a significant improvement over the country's flawed 2007 presidential contest.

State Department spokesman Mark Toner congratulated the declared winner, President Goodluck Jonathan, and said the United States sees the vote as "a positive new beginning for Nigeria."

Speaking in Washington April 19, Toner said Nigerians had been given a real opportunity to select their senior leadership, and the election "sets Nigeria on a course toward solidifying and improving its democracy through strong governance and transparent institutions."

Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission, headed by Attahiru Jega, announced April 18 that Jonathan received 22.5 million votes, or approximately 57 percent of the total, which was high enough to avoid a runoff election with his nearest rival, General Muhammadu Buhari, who received 12.2 million votes.

According to press reports, news of Jonathan's victory prompted riots in the north of the country, with charges of ballot rigging. The riots have reportedly displaced around 16,000 people and destroyed several churches.

Toner condemned the violence and called upon "all candidates, political parties and supporters to respect the results of the election" and to "channel any grievances or challenges peacefully" for redress by legal and administrative personnel in the country.

Observer teams from the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) reported that the presidential vote had met their criteria to be considered fair and transparent.

ECOWAS observer mission head and former Liberian President Amos Sawyer told reporters April 17 that his 300-member team "found no major incidents or irregularities" and described the vote as "a historic step for the strengthening of democracy and good governance in Nigeria."

Former Ghanaian President John Kufuor headed the AU observer team. He said the election had been fair and credible, and that any questions of fraud would be misplaced, according to press reports.

Speaking on April 17, Kufuor said Nigerians all over the country had "shown determination to exercise their franchise and give themselves the leader they want, and it's refreshing."

"Nigeria hasn't been served too well for decades electorally, but to our pleasant surprise we found the people of Nigeria generally are the security against this," Kufuor said.

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson praised the conduct of Nigeria's National Assembly elections, which were held April 9, and wrote in an April 15 commentary that he and other U.S. officials "were heartened by what we saw" when observing the vote for the legislature.

"In sharp contrast to its elections of 2007, Nigeria was demonstrating that it can hold credible elections that allow the Nigerian people a meaningful opportunity to elect their leaders," he wrote.

Carson said all Africans "deserve smooth, peaceful, transparent and credible elections" and that Nigeria's presidential and National Assembly contests, as well as the April 26 vote for the country's state governorships and state assemblies, "provide an historic opportunity for Nigeria to become a model for the rest of Africa and the world, especially for those citizens demanding democracy in their countries."

U.S., Pakistani Officials Review Pakistan's Economy, Recovery

By MacKenzie C. Babb
Staff Writer

Washington — U.S. and Pakistani officials have met to review the state of Pakistan's economy, its reform efforts and ongoing flood recovery programs as part of continued support for the U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue, according to the U.S. State Department.

"The two sides focused on how to strengthen the foundations of the economy to expand employment opportunities and move toward self-sufficiency and away from donor dependence," an April 18 State Department announcement said.

The Working Group on Economics and Finance convened April 18 under the U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue. Participants included Pakistani Finance Minister Hafeez Shaikh, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Thomas Nides, U.S. Assistant Treasury Secretary Charles Collyns and David Lipton, senior director for international economics on President Obama's national security staff.

The United States recognized Pakistan's recently implemented measures to strengthen its fiscal framework as it develops its 2011-2012 budget, and encouraged major structural reforms to create strong growth and job creation, particularly in the energy sector. Shaikh presented Pakistan's development strategy, "intended to enable a sustained period of increased growth" based on national consensus and "with measures to continue progress on sustainability and encourage international investors and partners," according to the release.

The United States committed its continued support to Pakistan as the country implements those programs. The United States also praised Pakistan's leadership for its initiative in convening a broad-ranging national energy summit to encourage dialogue and action from different economic, societal and political stakeholders.

"Both sides also agreed that closer consultations on assistance priorities have helped achieve greater focus in U.S. assistance to energy, economic growth, stability, education and health as key areas for Pakistan's future development," the release said. It added that talks reviewed the status of U.S. programs to assist the recovery from Pakistan's devastating floods in July, which affected 21 million people, killed 1,800 and destroyed thousands of hectares of crops.

The United States committed nearly \$600 million in disaster assistance for Pakistan's flood recovery in 2010. The working group affirmed that \$310 million is actively being used to rehabilitate infrastructure, including for seeds and fertilizer last fall as well as planning now to repair roads, rebuild schools and rehabilitate irrigation systems. The United States also confirmed its \$190 million contribution to Pakistan's Citizen's Damage Compensation Fund to help flood victims.

The release said the meeting underlined the "joint commitment of Pakistan and the United States to work with bilateral and multilateral development partners toward stability."

The U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue was launched in 2006, with meetings held at the ministerial level for the first time in March 2010. In addition to economics and finance, the dialogue includes working groups on democratic institutions, agriculture and food security, communications, water resources, energy security, health care, women's empowerment, and recovery and reconstruction from the floods.

The Obama administration has begun using strategic dialogues as a means for deeper consultations and commitment among select nations. The dialogues are designed to respond to the specific needs of partner nations and enhance cooperation in critical areas.

Solar Technology Powers Learning in Senegal

By Sonya F. Weakley
Staff Writer

Washington — In four middle schools in the Fatick region of Senegal, nylon fabric bound to interlocking pieces of plastic piping is stirring a small revolution in educational philosophy.

The materials may seem simple, but that's the point. Combined with a solar-powered battery running a "netbook" computer connected to a small projector and infrared camera, these items are enabling teachers and students to use uncomplicated technology as a tool for 21st-century learning.

With the help of a small U.S.-based company called CyberSmart, the Senegalese teachers are using the "interactive whiteboards" to spark creativity in the classroom and discussion among themselves.

The simple setup demonstrates that providing a modern education does not need to consume a great deal of energy. Rather than being concerned with building or connecting to a sophisticated power infrastructure, "off-grid" institutions in developing countries can bypass that expensive path and use low-cost, low-energy solutions.

CyberSmart came up with the idea for the whiteboards after observing how teachers were teaching, how technology was being used and whether the two were working together to advance learning. In most cases, they weren't.

Jim Teicher, the company's education director, said the schools did not have the means to make standard technology work in older buildings with large numbers of students. "How could they truly reach more students?" he asked.

While some of the schools, which are in poorer rural areas, have a small number of donated laptops or desktops, those computers cannot be used on a regular basis by all students, whose numbers range from several hundred to more than 1,000. In many cases, teachers have not been prepared to use the computers as teaching tools.

CyberSmart's nylon whiteboard stands directly in front of all the students in a classroom and can be moved between classrooms several times a day. The portable setup requires no electricity and can be used in any school, including in buildings that may be in disrepair. Solar panels installed outside the school keep batteries charged and ready.

STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH

CyberSmart is using a grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development to pilot a training program in the four Senegalese schools to help teachers create plans for using the whiteboards to teach math, science and social studies and to share those lessons with other teachers. The goal is to build a learning community among the teachers.

"We teach teachers to implement classroom practices that engage students in a learner-centered approach. Students are encouraged to lead their own instruction, finding real-world meaning in learning with the aid of our interactive whiteboard as a tool," Teicher said. It can require a significant shift in thinking for some teachers to let students lead the process, he added.

Rather than try to modify existing technology used in the United States, CyberSmart assessed the types of technology that schools in a developing environment could support and use in sufficient scale to have the greatest impact on learning at the least possible cost.

The company focused on building a solution that fits the Senegalese schools' infrastructure using easy-to-find lightweight components with the goal of using the whiteboards in the daily curriculum, not to teach computer skills. The computer and projector are placed behind the screen to keep them out of the way while supporting the "touch screen" interactivity.

Students walk up to the screen to touch a virtual keyboard or drag and drop icons while their classmates watch. "The equipment is as transparent and easy to use as possible so that the focus can be on learning," Teicher said.

"For the desktop, it's one student in front of his computer," said Momadou Kane, principal of CEM Mbellacadio, a middle school that has seven desktop computers for 1,044 students. "The interactive whiteboard comes into the classroom, and the students and teachers work together building knowledge. There is ... initiative, student independence, also students' creativity."

Marieme Thioro Ndione, a teacher at CEM 2 de Gossas, which has no other computers or electronic tools, said she would like to use the whiteboard to spark discussion about the roles of women. Many girls leave the schools at an early age to get married, she said.

"We can show pictures of women working, of them as officials and ministers," she said, "showing films and having a discussion among the girls to encourage them and show that a girl should go to school like the boys."

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