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President Obama Administration Announces National Security Staff Changes

By Steve Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama intends to nominate four officials for key roles on his national security team and to implement his strategy in Afghanistan, the White House says.

Speaking on background in an April 27 teleconference, a senior Obama administration official told reporters the president will announce April 28 that he has asked current Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Leon Panetta to serve as his new secretary of defense; current commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan Army General David Petraeus to be his new DCI; and Ryan Crocker to be the next U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan.

All three appointments will require confirmation by the U.S. Senate.

In addition, the president will appoint Marine Lieutenant General John Allen, the deputy commander of U.S. Central Command, to succeed General Petraeus in Afghanistan, the official said.

The decisions came as a result of current Defense Secretary Robert Gates' decision to resign by the middle of 2011, and the end of Ambassador Karl Eikenberry's two-year tenure as the chief U.S. envoy in Kabul, the official said.

Gates had announced he would step down in summer 2010. The official said President Obama's proposed staff changes are "the culmination of a multi-month careful process by the president."

The official said there will be "no gaps, no disruptions" in the execution of national security policy, and that the appointees are "truly the best people for these jobs."

He said outgoing Secretary Gates "will likely be seen as one of the best" defense secretaries in U.S. history.

If the Senate confirms the president's nominees, the official said, he expects that Gates would leave the Pentagon in June and Panetta would succeed him in July. Petraeus' nomination will be submitted during the summer, and he would be in place at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) by the beginning of September, which is when General Allen is expected to assume command in Afghanistan, the official said.

The official also said that the president's strategy in Afghanistan, announced in December 2009, remains in

place despite the personnel changes.

As part of that strategy, the transition of responsibility for Afghanistan's security from coalition forces to Afghan forces began in some provinces earlier in 2011, and U.S. forces will begin a drawdown in summer 2011 "that would lead ultimately to a full Afghan lead on the security side by the year 2014," the official said.

U.S. Works to Expand Global Trade Ties

By MacKenzie C. Babb
Staff Writer

Washington — The United States is building on the strength of existing trade agreements while "striving for even more robust commitments that can be supported ever more widely," U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk says.

"We're headed in the right direction with growing momentum. We are advancing an ambitious trade agenda, opening up markets while being more responsive to the needs and concerns of American businesses, workers and families," Kirk said in prepared remarks April 28 to the Washington International Trade Association.

Kirk underscored the importance of trade in helping individuals through the economic recovery, both in the United States and across the globe.

"Trade can and should enable economic development, helping poor families around the world while at the same time fostering the growth of new markets for U.S. products," he said.

Kirk said his office is making progress to meet President Obama's goal of doubling U.S. exports by the end of 2014. He said exports were up 17 percent in 2010 and that increased exports have contributed to 13 straight months of private sector job growth, adding a total of 1.8 million jobs.

Kirk highlighted other steps taken in 2010, including resolving key trade concerns with Russia as the United States worked to help Russia advance toward accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). He said Russia is the largest economy outside the WTO, and bringing the country into the organization "gets them into a rules-based system where we have more tools to ward off problems and to address them once they arise."

Kirk said the United States is also making "steady progress" in preparing free-trade agreements with South Korea, Colombia and Panama. In December 2010, he said, the United States successfully concluded negotiations with South Korea to provide "market access and a level

playing field for U.S. auto workers and manufacturers.”

Obama and Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos agreed to a labor-rights action plan in March that will allow the two to move forward with a free-trade agreement, Kirk said. In April, Panama completed the remaining steps regarding tax and labor issues necessary for the United States to move forward with a trade deal there.

The U.S. trade chief said in addition to pursuing ambitious goals for greater market access, the United States is “seeking high standards to foster and protect innovation, to reduce nontariff barriers to trade, and to respect and protect labor rights and the environment.”

Kirk called on key partners, including emerging economies, to work with the United States to find trade solutions that make sense for the 21st-century economy.

U.S. Sees Shift of Extremist Power Away from al-Qaida’s Core

By Jeff Baron
Staff Writer

Washington — A top U.S. counterterrorism official says that al-Qaida is getting weaker, but that its affiliates have grown more powerful and independent.

Daniel Benjamin, the State Department’s coordinator for counterterrorism, also told a conference April 27 at a Washington policy research organization that the al-Qaida affiliates are more dangerous not only because they are stronger and more technically sophisticated but also because, in many cases, the countries in which they operate are going through upheavals.

“We are in a fast-changing landscape — a season of transformative change in the Middle East whose full implications are still taking shape,” Benjamin said. “The changes of government and broad-based efforts to win new freedoms for the people of the region hold enormous promise.”

In the long run, if that promise is fulfilled, he said, al-Qaida’s “single-minded focus on terrorism as an instrument of political change would be severely and irretrievably delegitimized. That would be a genuinely strategic blow.”

In the meantime, though, he warned that instability is offering opportunities to such groups as al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb specializes in kidnapping for ransom, which Benjamin said has become a leading tool for financing al-Qaida groups worldwide. And al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula “continues to

demonstrate its growing ambitions and strong desire to carry out attacks outside of its region” while becoming a leading source of propaganda, Benjamin said.

Al-Shabaab, though not an affiliate of al-Qaida, also is growing in strength in Somalia, which lacks a strong government.

Benjamin said that thanks to counterterrorism efforts in cooperation with Pakistan, “the [al-Qaida] core has had significant leadership losses and is finding it more difficult to raise money, train recruits and plan attacks outside of the region.” It and other groups, such as Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, the Haqqani Network and Lashkar e-Tayyiba, remain a menace in South Asia, he said.

And Benjamin said al-Qaida in Iraq continues to carry out occasional attacks but has dwindled in power and support.

To counter the shifts in the terrorism threat, Benjamin said, the United States is working to strengthen other governments for short-term improvements in security and longer-term improvements in governance and the rule of law.

Much of the effort has been in Pakistan, which Benjamin said “today is more willing to take on extremist groups that directly threaten Pakistani targets, such as military bases, intelligence offices and police stations.”

Although Yemen has been in upheaval in recent weeks, Benjamin said he is hopeful that the government that emerges will want to cooperate against terrorism. The U.S. effort is designed to improve the Yemeni government’s ability to provide security and other services for its people, along with a substantial increase in development.

Benjamin said efforts are expanding through regional groups as well as in U.S. programs with individual countries. The goal, he said, is for those regions and governments to have a greater capacity to undercut terrorist groups in the long run.

U.S. and International Community Continue Pressure on Qadhafi

By M. Scott Bortot
Staff Writer

Washington — Amid promising signs of civil society in Libya, the United States continues to work with its partners in Libya and the international community to pressure Muammar Qadhafi to step down, U.S. Ambassador to Libya Gene Cretz said April 27.

"I think that we are bringing to bear all we can in terms of our coalition partners, in terms of our own actions, and in terms of beginning to look at the political processes that hopefully will lead to an end to this," Cretz said.

The Libya Contact Group meeting in Doha, the NATO ministerial meeting in Berlin, and the African Union, Arab League and United Nations meetings in Cairo show the depth of the effort by the world community to find a solution to the Libya crisis.

"It is a deliberative process that we are engaged in with our allies," Cretz said. "Number 1 was the military part, the protection of humanitarian life and trying to get services flowing to those cities that are affected by Qadhafi, and Number 2 is the political part ... the international consensus that now has become quite solid, that in order for there to be a solution to this, Qadhafi needs to leave."

The U.S. special envoy to the Libyan National Transitional Council, Chris Stevens, arrived in Benghazi on April 5 to open a dialogue with Qadhafi's opposition. Cretz said Stevens is working with the council and meeting with other elements of emerging Libyan civil society.

The council members "continue to say the right things. They are reaching out to the international community and they are trying to be as inclusive as possible. They are working through the normal bugs that would be a part of any stand-up transitional government in a country that has not had politics for 40 years," Cretz said.

Because Libyans have lived under authoritarian rule for more than 40 years, they will face challenges in building a new government, Cretz said. Despite the hurdles, there are encouraging signs in Benghazi of what a Libya of the future might look like.

"You have [nongovernmental organizations] springing up. You have people debating with each other, debating political issues. You have a seminar at the university ... of a professor talking about constitutional issues. You have cultural events, you have poetry readings, you have newspapers," Cretz said. U.S. envoy Stevens "and I think others have described the situation as a world that you wouldn't recognize had you been in Libya on February 16."

Although the U.S. Embassy staff members left Tripoli, they maintain contact with people in all regions of the country.

"From these people we have been able to get almost daily reports about the situation in the west and about the brutal kind of activities that Qadhafi is taking against the west," Cretz said.

Qadhafi's family and military units remain the core elements of the regime, but there are others who may be willing to move against it but cannot out of fear, Cretz said. The U.S. is reaching out to them but it must be their decision about which side to take.

Cretz said it is clear that Libyans around the country want Qadhafi to step down and for his regime to end.

"Our sense is that it is not only Benghazi in the east that has forged a consensus, as we have in the international community that Qadhafi has to go and that a new process has to begin," Cretz said. "I think that is a consensus that we have heard from our contacts in the west, the south, the north and in the east, so there is a Libyan consensus on this."

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