

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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U.S. Pledges More Assistance for Côte d'Ivoire Relief

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer

Washington — More U.S. assistance will soon be on the way to Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia with the State Department announcement June 15 of a \$7.5 million donation to help people displaced by political violence.

The United States has contributed more than \$51 million to help populations in the region affected by the violence that erupted in the aftermath of a disputed Ivorian election in November 2010 between challenger Alassane Ouattara and incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo. Estimates on the number of people who fled the violence rose to as high as 1 million at one point, but have since fallen. The U.N. Refugee Agency reported June 14 that its representatives in West Africa have registered more than 320,000 internally displaced persons, and an estimated 200,000 Ivorian refugees are being hosted by several West African nations.

"The situation in Côte d'Ivoire is improving," according to the press release issued by the State Department June 15, "but some continuing unrest is still generating new refugees, and fear among those who fled keeps a majority of refugees from returning home."

The U.N. Refugee Agency says tension remains high in the southwestern Bas-Sassandra region, where mercenaries killed 280 civilians in early May.

The aid funds will be used for food, health care, water and the construction of camps where needed.

Almost half of the U.S. assistance directed to Côte d'Ivoire has flowed through the U.N. Refugee Agency. The United States is providing funding for several U.N. and nongovernmental organizations working in the country, including the World Food Programme, the International Committee of the Red Cross and UNICEF.

Michelle Obama to Promote Youth Agenda in South Africa, Botswana

By MacKenzie C. Babb | Staff Writer

Washington — First lady Michelle Obama will travel to South Africa and Botswana for a weeklong official visit "focused on youth leadership, education, health and wellness."

"The trip is a continuation of Mrs. Obama's work to engage young people at home and abroad, from mentoring students in the United States and encouraging them to gain international experience, to encouraging young people to excel academically, serve and lead," the White House said in a press release announcing the June

21-26 visit.

"In addition to advancing her international youth engagement agenda, the first lady's events will amplify the president's support for democracy, development and economic opportunity across Africa," the White House said.

The first lady will deliver the keynote address to a U.S.-sponsored Young African Women Leaders Forum in South Africa. Participants include women from across sub-Saharan Africa who are leading or involved in social and economic initiatives in their countries.

"What we've seen in country after country is an undeniable trend that in places where women are in power, the societies are more prosperous and democratic," said presidential adviser Ben Rhodes of the National Security Council during a call with reporters June 15. "And so, we believe that it's a very important message to send that the empowerment of women and girls in Africa and around the world will help foster greater peace and prosperity."

The White House said the forum "will build on the Obama administration's ongoing engagement with the next generation of African leaders and the momentum of the August 2010 President's Forum with Young African Leaders held at the White House."

Rhodes said the first lady's trip is fundamentally connected to the president's goal of advancing democracy in Africa, and emphasized that Africa's democratic development, health and security greatly affect the future of the United States.

"Building stronger and more enduring relationships with Africa's emerging young leaders, tapping the strength and potential of African women, and investing in the health and well-being of its children upholds core American values and advances American interests," the White House said. "The American people have deep ties and enduring relationships with Africa's many nations and a strong interest in the well-being and prosperity of its people."

During her visit to the two democratic nations, the first lady will be joined by her daughters, Malia and Sasha, and her mother, Marian Robinson. Obama is set to meet with South African President Jacob Zuma and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and is scheduled to visit the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Johannesburg on a tour led by the anti-apartheid leader's wife, Graca Machel. She will speak to students at the University of Cape Town before traveling to Gabarone, Botswana, where she will meet with President Ian Khama and visit a children's clinic before returning to Washington June 27.

Online Activists Receiving U.S. Technical Support, Training

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer

Washington — By the end of 2011, the United States will have spent \$70 million over the past few years to promote Internet freedom around the world.

The funding has included investments in technologies to help people circumvent strict firewalls. Also included has been training for activists in new programming and helping them understand the online risks they are facing.

“People are exercising their human rights online, and we’ve become more conscious of the various ways that repressive regimes are using technology themselves to limit and punish people for the exercise of those rights,” said a senior State Department official, who asked not to be identified.

Speaking to reporters in Washington June 15, the official said the Obama administration has made Internet freedom a priority. Universal human rights principles protect freedom of assembly, peaceful dissent and the ability to speak your mind, the official said, and every country is obliged to honor them.

“I suspect that there are governments that wished that we weren’t investing in this way,” the official said. But governments that respect the rights of their citizens “have nothing to fear in free speech” or from a free Internet, the official said.

At the same time, those who are working to undermine Internet freedom through tactics such as firewalls, censorship and network shutdowns are losing the battle.

“The advent of these modern communications technologies means that nothing can be swept under the rug anymore. ... And that’s something that governments are having to reckon with,” the official said.

The State Department supports more than 12 different types of circumvention technology to help people get around firewalls, and has employed what the official described as a “techie-without-borders” service to develop new programming and to “be responsive to the ongoing challenges of people who are trying to call out the problems in their societies and give voice to their own future.”

“One of our jobs is to keep the broader picture in mind, keep focused on people, keep responding to people on the ground and to stay ahead of the curve in terms of the innovations of repression, so that we can help people on the ground be innovating their expression at the same time,” the official said.

Funding has supported training for more than 5,000 digital activists, democracy activists and human rights advocates around the world who now distribute the technology and know-how they learned to their peers.

The training also helps them to “understand exactly what risks remain and what risks can be addressed,” the official said, including identifying viruses and keylogger software that records whatever they type.

The State Department initiative has shifted much of its focus toward mobile phone technology, due to the extremely high penetration of mobile phones and text messaging around the world, in contrast to the relative lack of available Internet service. But many are not aware of the risks they face when they send texts, the official said.

“There’s been a myth that if you send [a text message], it’s safe and no one can track you, but if you send an email, that can be monitored. And that’s just not true,” the official said.

“Some of the things that we’re funding are mobile communications to make mobile communications safe and so that people can send secure text messages or can do other things, because ... they’re not sitting at their desktops. But they also don’t necessarily have the proper information about how to use these tools safely.”

The official said that when people are able to speak freely, they tend to discuss the kind of society they want to live in and how they feel their country should be governed.

“Our goal is to make sure that we are doing what we can to amplify the voices and create the space for free expression and freedom of association and assembly online, regardless of who the group is,” the official said.

Saving the Environment Might Also Save Health

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer

Washington — In the wide-ranging and often fractious debate about climate change, many ideas have come forth to reduce greenhouse gases and mitigate climate change. A report issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) June 14 projects that adoption of some of those proposals may deliver a pay-off in better health before they have a substantial impact on the environment.

WHO is planning a series of reports, Health in the Green Economy. The first one, focusing on housing, was released at an international meeting of health practitioners and policymakers in Washington. Climate-friendly housing construction and insulation techniques that better protect living areas from temperature extremes would help people susceptible to heart attack or stroke,

and would alleviate forms of asthma and allergies, according to the report.

“This series explains why green housing and home energy, transport and urban environment can improve our health ... and why the health sector can prevent much disease, at very little cost, by advocating for healthier investments in some key sectors,” said WHO’s Dr. Carlos Dora, an epidemiologist and coordinator of the series.

Health in the Green Economy makes a number of recommendations about how sustainable development policies could improve public health. It also argues that scientists and policymakers considering climate change policies have underemphasized the health concerns that circle the prospect of climate change.

For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the world’s most authoritative forum on the topic, cites vehicle emissions as a major source of greenhouse gases, trapping the Earth’s heat and raising the global temperature. Their most recent report, WHO points out, focuses on better fuels and engines to ameliorate this problem. But Health in the Green Economy emphasizes walking, bicycling and public transport as a more available and more healthful way to eliminate vehicle emissions.

Indoor air pollution that results from the use of carbon-based fuels in cooking causes almost 2 million deaths a year, WHO estimates. Clean cookstoves provide an immediate alternative, if international organizations could mobilize the resources to buy and more widely distribute these stoves. Further, 17 percent of pneumonia deaths among African and Latin American children could be prevented with stoves using clean fuels, such as propane and liquid petroleum gas (LPG), or with cookers using solar power or charcoal.

In May, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton endorsed the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves, which strives to help get clean cookstoves into 100 million homes by 2020. “Reaching this goal will save lives and reduce pollution,” she wrote in a commentary published in the May 6 edition of USA Today. “It will also give people, especially women and girls, a new tool to create economic opportunity for themselves.”

The U.S. government, European and South American governments, and private-sector partners are also members of the initiative to reduce the hazard of open-fire cooking, which disproportionately harms women and children.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is engaged in a campaign to help state and city health departments in the United States prepare for the

health effects related to climate change. The Atlanta-based agency has awarded grants to 10 health departments in cities and states to develop ways to anticipate people’s needs in a changing climate, predicting health impacts and devising solutions.

The grantees will look at the issues from two perspectives. One group will examine their communities’ capabilities as they are currently structured to provide relief to climate change health impacts. The second group will look at what health services would require expansion to help people adversely affected by climate change impacts as they will arise in their particular geographic areas.

Human Rights Council Statement on Human Rights Abuses in Syria

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Office of the Spokesperson
June 16, 2011

STATEMENT BY VICTORIA NULAND,
SPOKESPERSON

Human Rights Council Statement on Human Rights Abuses in Syria

Yesterday at the Human Rights Council, the United States joined more than 50 other UN member states in issuing a forceful statement addressing the deteriorating human rights situation in Syria, calling for an end to the on-going human rights violations committed by the Syrian authorities, and urging the Government of Syria to allow the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Office access to Syria to conduct their mission. The international community has been shocked by the horrific reports of torture and arbitrary arrests, and widespread use of violence against peaceful protestors. The Human Rights Council has spoken again and used its voice to pressure the Syrian authorities to stop these human rights violations. The United States condemns in the strongest possible terms the use of force by the Syrian government against peaceful demonstrators. This outrageous use of violence to quell protests must come to an end now.

This action comes six weeks after the Human Rights Council held a special session on the crisis in Syria where the Council unequivocally condemned the use of violence against peaceful protestors by Syrian authorities, and called upon the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to urgently dispatch a mission to Syria to investigate the Syrian government’s ongoing violations of its citizens’ human rights. To date, the High Commissioner’s office has not been permitted to enter Syria.

This statement further demonstrates the international

community's resolve to highlight the ongoing campaign of violence by the Syrian government. The international community again calls on the Syrian authorities to establish credible, independent, and transparent investigations into these abuses, accountability for those who perpetrated them, and to allow unfettered access to the UN High Commissioner's mission to investigate the many and varied allegations. The Syrian government must demonstrate that it is serious about addressing the Syrian people's desire for freedom and a transition to democracy. The Syrian government must meet the aspirations of the Syrian people, including upholding individual's universal rights and allowing them to peacefully assemble and freely voice their grievances. The United States strongly supports the universal rights of the Syrian people, including the rights of peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, and the ability to determine their own destiny.

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