

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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President Obama Boosts U.S. Efforts to Prevent Genocide

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer

Washington – President Obama has ordered the creation of an interagency U.S. government board to more effectively coordinate the U.S. response to unfolding human rights atrocities around the world, and has closed loopholes in the U.S. visa system to ban human rights violators from entering the United States.

Human rights atrocities in the past, such as the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the Holocaust in Europe, have shown that “concerted and coordinated effort” is needed to prevent states from systematically slaughtering their civilians, the president said in an August 4 memorandum to top administration officials.

“Governmental engagement on atrocities and genocide too often arrives too late, when opportunities for prevention or low-cost, low-risk action have been missed. By the time these issues have commanded the attention of senior policy makers, the menu of options has shrunk considerably and the costs of action have risen,” Obama said.

“In the face of a potential mass atrocity, our options are never limited to either sending in the military or standing by and doing nothing,” he said. But to exercise a wider range of options, such as economic and diplomatic interventions, and noncombat military actions to outright intervention, the U.S. government needs “a comprehensive policy framework and a corresponding interagency mechanism” to allow it to more quickly and effectively prevent and respond to mass atrocities and genocide.

Obama said he is establishing the interagency Atrocities Prevention Board, which will include officials from the White House, Pentagon, State Department and other agencies to respond “early, proactively, and decisively” to unfolding mass atrocities and genocide. Using a “whole-of-government approach,” the board will create an early warning system and coordinate U.S. policy and a full range of responses to developments.

He also said the United States must be ready to work with countries that are better positioned to respond to crises or atrocities, and the board will work on strategies to engage them “to ensure that the burdens of atrocity prevention and response are appropriately shared.”

The president said that the prevention of mass atrocities and genocide is a core U.S. national security interest, as well as a moral responsibility.

“Our security is affected when masses of civilians are slaughtered, refugees flow across borders, and murderers wreak havoc on regional stability and livelihoods. America’s reputation suffers, and our ability to bring about change is constrained, when we are perceived as idle in the face of mass atrocities and genocide,” he said.

In a separate August 4 proclamation, Obama explicitly barred individuals who have organized or participated in serious violations of human rights or humanitarian law, or have committed other atrocities, from obtaining a visa to enter the United States.

Although certain types of human rights violators have already been banned from entering the United States under the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, the president’s proclamation will fill in gaps for those whose crimes did not fit into the specifically enumerated categories listed in the earlier legislation.

According to an August 4 White House fact sheet, the proclamation expands “the grounds for denial of entry into the United States to cover a broader array of recognized violations of international humanitarian law and international criminal law, such as war crimes and crimes against humanity.”

It also covers those who participated in serious human rights violations, “such as prolonged arbitrary detention, forced disappearances, slavery, and forced labor, as well as participants in widespread or systematic violence against civilians based on ethnicity or other grounds,” the fact sheet said.

The fact sheet said the expanded visa ban will help deter would-be participants or organizers of atrocities and human rights violators and “more effectively shame those who are organizing such conduct.”

In an August 4 statement, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the measures announced by President Obama will help the United States “put our principles into practice” and protect more people around the world.

She said the new interagency Atrocities Prevention Board will “develop cross-cutting strategies to prevent atrocities and ensure that senior officials throughout our government are warned about emerging threats.”

Through the board, the expanded visa ban and a thorough review of its practices and capabilities, the United States is improving its ability to “prevent and respond to future mass atrocities and human rights violations,” Clinton said.

Vice President Biden to Travel to China, Mongolia and Japan

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr. | Staff Writer

Washington — Vice President Biden will visit China, Mongolia and Japan beginning on August 16 for talks on a broad range of bilateral, regional and global security issues, the White House says.

Biden is visiting China at the invitation of Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping in the first of series of planned reciprocal visits between the two vice presidents that was announced during Chinese President Hu Jintao's state visit to Washington earlier this year, the White House said.

President Obama welcomed President Hu to the White House January 19, calling for greater cooperation in security and economic relations. At the White House arrival ceremony, Obama said the United States and China "have an enormous stake in each other's success. In an interconnected world, in a global economy, nations — including our own — will be more prosperous and more secure when we work together."

The White House said that "while in China, the vice president will meet with Vice President Xi and other Chinese leaders, including President Hu and Premier Wen Jiabao, to consult on a broad range of bilateral, regional and global issues. The vice president will also visit the city of Chengdu, in China's Southwest."

In Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, Biden will demonstrate U.S. support for Mongolia's two decades of democratic development and its growing economic ties with the United States.

In Japan, Biden will express strong U.S. support for one of its closest allies in the wake of the March 11 Fukushima earthquake, tsunami and subsequent nuclear emergency, the White House statement said. While in Japan, Biden also will visit U.S. civilian and military personnel to thank them for their assistance in responding to the earthquake, as well as highlight Japan's resilience during the recovery and rebuilding process.

The vice president's trip follows closely on Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's recent travel to meetings with foreign ministers at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Lower Mekong Initiative meeting and the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bali, Indonesia. Clinton also delivered a major U.S. economic policy speech in Hong Kong on July 25 and then held meetings with State Councilor Dai Bingguo in the southern city Shenzhen.

In Hong Kong, Clinton told Asian business executives

that the most urgent task facing the United States and its Asian allies and trading partners is realigning their economies in the wake of the 2007-2009 global financial crisis. That means pursuing a balanced strategy for global economic growth, Clinton said in her speech in Hong Kong. It is an approach that has been embraced by President Obama and Chinese President Hu, and is promoted by the Group of 20 advanced economies.

Obama will host the 19th annual meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Honolulu November 12-13, where it is likely that Obama and Hu will meet. And they will meet later during the annual ASEAN Summit in Bali November 17-19, and at the East Asia Summit after the ASEAN meeting.

U.S. Supports Protesters Facing Violent Attacks in Iran, Syria

By MacKenzie C. Babb | Staff Writer

Washington — The United States is working to support opposition protesters in Iran and Syria who are demanding democracy and basic rights as their governments continue to respond with violent crackdowns that violate "every important international human rights standard," a U.S. official says.

"In both of these countries, there is a courageous populous, a courageous group of people who are challenging these repressive governments," Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Michael Posner said, adding that U.S. support "needs to be rooted in the assumption that change will occur from within both of these countries."

Posner testified about human rights violations in Iran and Syria before a House of Representatives Foreign Affairs subcommittee July 28. He said the United States is engaged in a wide range of efforts to help citizens in both countries, from facilitating correspondence and meetings among opposition leaders to supporting "severely prosecuted" nongovernmental organizations. He also said the United States is working to provide training and to improve the protesters' ability to communicate with the outside world through an extensive Internet freedom program.

Posner was joined at the hearing by Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman, who emphasized that the United States "has not and will not ignore those who are struggling for their rights."

"The American people and our government stand united in admiration and support for those who have boldly assumed the duty and made the sacrifices to advance their rights," Feltman said in prepared remarks.

The United States estimates that more than 1,600 people have been killed in Syria, including children, and at least 10,000 people have been jailed since demonstrations began in March, Posner said. He added that security forces there continue to hold people hostage through a “widening crackdown.”

“And yet, incredibly, the people of Syria have lost their fear. The demonstrations are continuing. They’re expanding,” Posner said.

Feltman said the opposition is organizing and has started to articulate an agenda for Syria’s future, “one in which all citizens, regardless of faith or ethnicity, are equal participants.” The United States strongly supports that vision, and hopes to see a Syria “that is united, where tolerance, respect for human rights and equality are the norms.”

Posner said the United States continues to review the Iranian government’s “outrageous” human rights record, which includes at least 190 executions in 2011 alone. He said the list of abuses there “goes on and on,” including severe restrictions on speech that target journalists, bloggers and teachers, as well as widespread persecution of religious minorities.

Feltman said the two governments not only share shameful records of abusing their own citizens, but they also play “destructive and destabilizing roles in the region.”

Since violence in each country began, the United States has joined the international community in imposing sanctions against top Syrian and Iranian officials, as well as on entities such as the Quds Force of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps. However, both Feltman and Posner emphasized that, in the end, lasting change in each country will come from within.

“Our belief is that these two governments, these two regimes, cannot stand the test of time because their own people are going to be ultimately successful in bringing about sustainable democracy and human rights,” Posner said.

Members of the subcommittee, including Chairman Steve Chabot, a Republican from Ohio, and the ranking Democrat, Representative Gary Ackerman from New York, condemned “in the strongest possible terms” the violence in Iran and Syria, and called on the Obama administration to take a stronger stance against human rights abuses and to provide more support to the opposition in both countries.

Expanded Area of Eastern Africa Is Beset with Famine

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer

Washington – Famine has reached new areas of Somalia, according to an August 3 analysis of conditions in the region, and food insecurity in other parts of the eastern African country will likely reach famine levels within the next six weeks.

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is issuing regular updates on the Horn of Africa humanitarian crisis, providing a broad overview of the conditions and the international response. The analysis finds that the threshold for famine has been surpassed in Balcad and Cadale in the Middle Shabelle region, in a settlement of internally displaced persons in the Afgoye Corridor, and in makeshift settlements of displaced people in parts of Mogadishu.

“The rest of southern Somalia is suffering severe food insecurity and is also likely to reach famine levels within the next six weeks, despite the mounting relief efforts,” according to the OCHA situation report.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is working closely with OCHA in the relief effort. Nancy Lindborg, USAID’s assistant administrator for democracy, conflict and humanitarian assistance, describes the situation in Somalia as stark.

“A famine determination is never made lightly and reflects the truly dire circumstances facing the people of southern Somalia,” said Lindborg in prepared testimony before a subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on August 3. “Based on nutrition and mortality surveys verified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], we estimate that more than 29,000 children under 5 – nearly 4 percent of children – have died in the last 90 days in southern Somalia.”

The OCHA report finds that only 20 percent of the 2.8 million people in urgent need of food aid in southern Somalia are being reached. Difficulty in getting food where it is most needed – the access problem – exists, officials say, because of the U.S.-designated terrorist organization al-Shabaab. Threats from the group led U.N. organizations to pull back from assistance programs in certain parts of Somalia early this year. The group continues to block aid deliveries, said Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Don Yamamoto.

“Those most seriously affected by the current drought are the more than 2 million Somalis trapped in al-Shabaab-controlled areas in south central Somalia,” Yamamoto

said at the Senate hearing, appearing on a panel with Lindborg. "As we seek to take advantage of any current openings to expand aid distribution, we are also working with our partners in the international community to counter al-Shabaab's ability to threaten our interests or continue to hold the Somali people hostage."

U.S. officials have previously stated that poor policy and governance decisions made by al-Shabaab have worsened the human toll of this disaster, brought on by drought conditions and crop failures. The group has denied the existence of severe food shortages.

According to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, which provides data influencing OCHA and U.S. aid agencies' decisions, "Famine exists when at least 20 percent of the population has extremely limited access to basic food requirements, global acute malnutrition exceeds 30 percent, and the death rate exceeds [two persons per 10,000 people per day] for the entire population."

Up to 12 million people in the Horn of Africa are expected to be affected by this humanitarian disaster. The United States has provided almost \$460 million to the overall relief effort. OCHA estimates that more than \$1 billion will be necessary to address all the needs.

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