

American

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U.S. Giving \$12 Million in Aid to Assad's Victims

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer | 15 March 2012

Washington — Along with joining the Arab League and others in the international community in pressing Bashar al-Assad to end the violence in Syria and agree to a peaceful political transition, the Obama administration is also providing more than \$12 million in humanitarian relief for the Syrian people.

According to a March 15 State Department fact sheet, the aid is being directed through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the World Food Programme (WFP) and other nongovernmental organizations.

The fact sheet noted that on March 14, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization issued a special alert over the state of food security in Syria, particularly for vulnerable groups. The WFP estimates that 1.4 million people face food insecurity due to the ongoing violence.

UNHCR and the ICRC, which are receiving \$5.5 million and \$3 million, respectively, in U.S. funds, are “delivering critical medical services and supplies, food, water, blankets, hygiene kits and heaters to the Syrian people,” the fact sheet said.

The U.S. funding “will also provide support for host families who are sheltering displaced Syrians due to the ongoing violence and to those who have fled to neighboring countries,” it added.

The WFP is planning to provide aid to 100,000 Syrians who have been affected by the now yearlong civil conflict by providing food rations to “displaced Syrians and host families, households that have lost breadwinners or livelihoods, female-headed households, and unaccompanied minors,” according to the fact sheet.

Approximately \$3 million of the U.S. funding has been designated for the WFP. The organization has been able to deliver 16,850 family food rations — sufficient to feed approximately 84,000 people for one month — to the Syrian Arab Red Crescent's warehouses. The Red Crescent has, in turn, distributed 7,415 WFP food rations to beneficiaries over the past month, but several of the worst-affected areas “remain inaccessible due to insecurity,” the fact sheet said.

In addition, the Obama administration is working to boost existing stockpiles of humanitarian supplies and equipment in the region that can be delivered to vulnerable and besieged Syrian communities as access and conditions allow, the fact sheet said.

ONE YEAR SINCE PEACEFUL PROTESTS BEGAN

March 15 marks the one-year anniversary since Syrians first gathered to protest the arrests of schoolchildren in the town of Deraa after graffiti criticizing Assad appeared there.

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters March 15 that the anniversary marks “a particularly horrific and violent day,” as security forces responded to those initial protests with brutal force.

“As the peaceful protests have grown, the Assad regime has become more and more bloody and violent vis-a-vis its own people, has gone into town after town trying to suppress the violence with guns rather than sitting and talking with its own people,” Nuland said. The United Nations estimates that more than 7,500 Syrians have been killed over the past year.

The United States and others have responded to the crackdown by increasing their sanctions against the Assad regime, with “more and more countries closing the noose on Syria, refusing to trade, refusing to conduct normal diplomacy, refusing to allow normal flights and commerce,” Nuland said, adding that the Obama administration will “keep up the pressure until the Syrian people achieve their objective.”

Nuland also said the United States has no reason to believe that email messages reportedly from Assad and leaked to the U.K. paper *The Guardian* earlier March 15 are “anything but authentic,” and she said the messages “tell an amazing tale” of the Syrian ruler.

“Far from being detached from what his military is doing, Assad seems to take pride in the viciousness of his own security forces. And he seems to make fun of the idea of actually sitting down and talking with his people,” she said.

The leak “really illustrates the character of this guy ... and why he has lost legitimacy not only in the eyes of his people but in the eyes of the international community,” Nuland said.

U.S. Agencies Combine Efforts to Fight Human Trafficking

By Jane Morse | Staff Writer | 15 March 2012

Washington — Efforts to end human trafficking are getting a big boost, thanks to increased cooperation among U.S. government agencies.

“Instead of a muddle of agencies claiming or rejecting different responsibilities,” said Secretary of State Hillary

Rodham Clinton, "we have in place in the Obama administration efficient, coordinated anti-trafficking teams. And they're making investigations more effective and helping victims."

Clinton met at the White House March 15 with top officials from the departments of Justice, Labor, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Defense, Transportation, and Education as well as several other agencies for the annual meeting of the President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. The task force was authorized by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 to coordinate federal efforts to combat human trafficking.

Around the world, some 27 million men, women and children are enslaved for labor or sexual exploitation, Clinton said. "We're trying to ensure that resources and support are available to victims wherever we find them."

Among the accomplishments reported for the last year:

- Prosecutions of human traffickers increased 30 percent over the past three years and several criminal networks that were trafficking women in the United States were dismantled, according to U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder.
- Improvements were made to the guest worker program to ensure that workers know their rights, according to Hilda Solis, secretary of labor.
- Intensified training programs and awareness campaigns have resulted in a 40 percent increase in calls to the trafficking hotline operated by the Department of Health and Human Services, according to Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. With 16,000 calls in the last year and 800 cases reported to law enforcement, "people are now aware there is someplace to go for help," Sebelius said.
- The "Blue Campaign" is leading to an ever increasing number of tips and investigations of traffickers, according to Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano. The campaign, which was designed to help train law enforcement to better recognize the signs of trafficking, is now training airline and fire department personnel who may encounter victims, Napolitano said.
- To insure that the U.S. transportation system is not an enabler for human trafficking, the Department of Transportation is operating an awareness campaign aimed at commercial truck drivers as well as personnel working at the nation's railroads, according to John Porcari, deputy secretary of transportation.

Clinton said the State Department provides grants in some 37 countries to support programs that assist trafficking survivors and help governments build capacity to fight this crime.

"Thanks to our leadership," Clinton said, "the

international community is getting behind the effort. Nearly 140 countries now have enacted modern anti-trafficking laws, and nearly 150 are party to the U.N. Trafficking in Persons Protocol."

In a statement released by the White House regarding the task force meeting, President Obama called human slavery an "affront to human dignity."

"The United States is committed to eradicating trafficking in persons," the president said, "and we will draw on tools ranging from law enforcement and victim service provision, to public awareness building and diplomatic pressure. Because we know that government efforts are not enough, we are also increasing our partnerships with a broad coalition of local communities, faith-based and non-governmental organizations, schools, and businesses."

"I am confident that we will one day end the scourge of modern slavery," Obama said, "because I believe in those committed to this issue: young people, people of faith and station, Americans who refuse to accept this injustice and will not rest until it is vanquished."

Fixing Economy Key to U.S. Future, Former Officials Say

By Andrzej Zwaniecki | Staff Writer | 15 March 2012

Washington – The period after the November elections and into the first months of 2013 will be critical for the U.S. economic future as the president and new Congress face the challenge of laying a framework for major economic reforms, according to former U.S. policymakers and central bankers.

The administration and legislators will be under pressure to act quickly on immediate issues such as the scheduled expiration of tax cuts, the government's debt ceiling and automatic spending cuts agreed to as part of a 2011 bipartisan congressional deal. But at an economic conference March 14 in Washington sponsored by Atlantic magazine, several speakers said these challenges may force the White House and Democratic and Republican lawmakers to look seriously at longer-term fiscal and public debt problems facing the U.S. economy.

No clear-cut solutions to those problems emerged from the event, which brought together more than a dozen U.S. central bank officials and former economic policymakers in Republican and Democratic administrations.

Most speakers agreed that tax and fiscal reforms are essential to fast and sustainable economic growth and to making the U.S. economy more competitive.

Paul Volcker, former chairman of the Federal Reserve, the U.S. central bank, challenged policymakers and legislators to come up with bolder tax and fiscal reforms than any plans hashed out so far by bipartisan deficit-cutting commissions.

"The problem is the United States can no longer claim unchallenged leadership over the world economy," Volcker said. "We have to do better."

He said tax reform should be more ambitious than the one in the 1980s.

"Very large changes are necessary. They need to be structural, they need debating, and this is the year to start the process," Volcker said.

Some speakers emphasized that a radical transformation of the overly complicated and inconsistent U.S. tax system has broad political support. It is "the one thing that unites people right now," said Lawrence Summers, who was a top economic adviser to President Obama. Summers said such reform is essential to reducing the budget deficit and accelerating economic growth. He said a simpler and fairer taxation system is also needed to address economic inequalities in the United States.

U.S. ECONOMY ON PATH TO RECOVERY

Most speakers said they are encouraged by signs of a strengthening economy. But they also said the U.S. economy still faced challenges ranging from high oil prices to the weak housing market. As Volcker put it: "We have a long slog ahead of us before we can claim anything like success."

Robert Rubin, treasury secretary in the administration of President Bill Clinton, urged a careful approach to cuts in federal government spending and to public health care and pension programs. Rubin said the U.S. government should develop a tax and debt-reduction strategy, but delay its implementation until the economy sufficiently strengthens. He advocated a policy focus on ensuring robust economic growth that will make national debt sustainable in the short term. Striking a similarly cautious note, Summers said that drastically slashing spending on public health and pension programs can have an "adverse" effect on the economy.

Former officials in Republican administrations agreed with their Democratic colleagues on the need for economic reforms, but often viewed their goals and major features differently.

Larry Lindsey, a former Federal Reserve governor and top economic adviser to President George W. Bush, said the U.S. economy "needs a combination of tax increases

and spending cuts."

"But we need quality rather than quantity," Lindsey said.

Recurring at the event were calls for significant investments in infrastructure and education. Speakers argued that inadequate and obsolete infrastructure creates bottlenecks in the economy and the lack of workers with advanced skills prevents tapping the full potential of advanced manufacturing and other skill-based industries. Former director of the Congressional Budget Office Douglas Holtz-Eakin, a Republican, said creating opportunities for workers to acquire needed skills is also a good way of addressing economic inequalities.

President Obama: U.S., Partners File Trade Case Against China

By MacKenzie C. Babb | Staff Writer | 13 March 2012

Washington — The United States, the European Union and Japan are filing a case against China for violating international trade rules by unfairly limiting exports of rare earth minerals, a key component in high-tech products manufactured around the world. They requested consultations with the Chinese government through the World Trade Organization March 13, a first step toward asking for a dispute resolution.

"We've got a constructive economic relationship with China and, whenever possible, we are committed to working with them to address our concerns," President Obama said in announcing the new trade case from the White House.

"We prefer dialogue," Obama said. "But when it is necessary, I will take action if our workers and our businesses are being subjected to unfair practices."

China holds at least 95 percent of the rare earth minerals in dispute, which senior Obama administration officials say are critical to the production of clean-energy technologies such as hybrid car batteries, wind turbines and energy-efficient lighting.

"We've got to take control of our energy future, and we can't let that energy industry take root in some other country because they were allowed to break the rules," Obama said.

Administration officials said the minerals are also used to manufacture steel, advanced electronics, automobiles and petroleum products in countries around the world.

Obama said that for these sectors to continue to produce, businesses need access to rare earth minerals supplied by China.

"Now if China would simply let the market work on its own, we'd have no objections," Obama said. "But their policies currently are preventing that from happening, and they go against the very rules that China agreed to follow" as a member of the World Trade Organization.

By limiting exports of rare earth minerals, senior administration officials said, Beijing has given Chinese companies an unfair advantage in the production of high-technology products. One official said this export restraint has resulted in harmful disruptions in supply chains around the world.

The case is Obama's latest in a series of measures cracking down on trade enforcement. The president said he recently signed a bill to help American companies facing unfair foreign competition.

"Because of subsidies from foreign governments, some of their foreign competitors are selling products at an artificially low price," Obama said. "That needs to stop."

He said that when the playing field is level, American workers and businesses will "always be able to compete and succeed."

"But the key is to make sure the playing field is level, and, frankly, sometimes it's not," Obama said.

In February, the president created the Interagency Trade Enforcement Center to investigate unfair international trade practices.

"Our competitors should be on notice: You will not get away with skirting the rules," Obama said.

The president pledged to continue working to give all workers and businesses a fair shot at success in the global economy.

U.S., U.K.: An Alliance the World Can Count On

13 March 2012

The following joint commentary by President Barack Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron of the United Kingdom appeared in the March 13 issue of the *Washington Post*, and is in the public domain. There are no republication restrictions.

An Alliance the World Can Count On

By Barack Obama and David Cameron

Seven decades ago, as our forces began to turn the tide of World War II, Prime Minister Winston Churchill traveled to Washington to coordinate our joint efforts. Our victories on the battlefield proved "what can be achieved

by British and Americans working together heart and hand," he said. "In fact, one might almost feel that if they could keep it up, there is hardly anything they could not do, either in the field of war or in the not less tangled problems of peace."

Keep it up we have — not only winning that war for our survival but also building the institutions that undergird international peace and security. The alliance between the United States and Great Britain is a partnership of the heart, bound by the history, traditions and values we share. But what makes our relationship special — a unique and essential asset — is that we join hands across so many endeavors. Put simply, we count on each other and the world counts on our alliance.

As leading world economies, we are coordinating closely with our G-8 and G-20 partners to put people back to work, sustain the global recovery, stand with our European friends as they resolve their debt crisis and curb the reckless financial practices that have cost our taxpayers dearly. We're committed to expanding the trade and investment that support millions of jobs in our two countries.

As the two largest contributors to the international mission in Afghanistan, we're proud of the progress our troops have made in dismantling al-Qaeda, breaking the Taliban's momentum and training Afghan forces. But as recent events underscore, this remains a difficult mission. We honor the profound sacrifices of our forces, and in their name we'll carry on the mission.

Over the next few days, we will consult about preparations for the NATO summit in Chicago, where our alliance will determine the next phase of the transition that we agreed to in Lisbon. This includes shifting to a support role in advance of Afghans taking full responsibility for security in 2014 and ensuring that NATO maintains an enduring commitment so that Afghanistan is never again a haven for al-Qaeda to launch attacks against our citizens.

As members of the international community, we have been united in imposing tough sanctions on the Iranian regime for failing to meet its international obligations. We believe there is time and space to pursue a diplomatic solution, and we are coordinating our diplomatic approach with China, France, Germany and Russia, our P5+1 partners. Meanwhile, as the United States imposes its strongest sanctions to date and the European Union prepares to impose an embargo on Iranian oil, the choice for Tehran will be sharpened — meet your international obligations or face the consequences.

As two nations that support the human rights and dignity of all people, we continue to stand with those brave

citizens across the Middle East and North Africa who are demanding their universal rights. Having joined in the mission to protect the Libyan people last year, we support Libyan efforts to build democratic institutions and hold free and fair elections this year. We condemn the Syrian regime's horrific violence against innocent civilians, and we are focused on the urgent humanitarian task of getting food and medicine to those in need. With our international partners, we'll continue to tighten the noose around Bashar al-Assad and his cohorts, and we'll work with the opposition and the United Nations - Arab League envoy Kofi Annan to plan for the transition that will follow Assad's departure from power.

As two of the world's wealthiest nations, we embrace our responsibility as leaders in the development that enables people to live in dignity, health and prosperity. Even as we redouble our efforts to save lives in Somalia, we're investing in agriculture to promote food security across the developing world. We're working to improve maternal health and end preventable deaths of children. With a renewed commitment to the lifesaving work of the Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria, we see the beginning of the end of the AIDS pandemic. Through our Open Government Partnership, we're striving to make governments more transparent and accountable.

Finally, as two peoples who live free because of the sacrifices of our men and women in uniform, we're working together like never before to care for them when they come home. With new long-term collaborations to help our wounded warriors recover, assist in veterans' transition back to civilian life and support military families, we recognize that our obligations to troops and veterans endure long after today's battles end.

Our troops and citizens have long shown what can be achieved when British and Americans work together, heart and hand, and why this remains an essential relationship - to our nations and the world. So like generations before us, we're going to keep it up. Because with confidence in our cause and faith in each other, we still believe that there is hardly anything we cannot do.

(Barack Obama is president of the United States. David Cameron is prime minister of Great Britain.)

Secretary Clinton: U.S. Consulting Closely with Seoul on North Korea

09 March 2012

Washington - Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) will continue to closely consult with each other on developments related to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (also known as North Korea).

Speaking with Republic of Korea Foreign Minister Kim Sung-Hwan at the State Department March 9, Clinton said the U.S.-ROK alliance is "a linchpin of America's strategic engagement in the Asia Pacific."

"Any effort by anyone to drive a wedge between the United States and the Republic of Korea will fail. We consult closely on all aspects of our diplomacy. This will not change," Clinton said, adding that both countries also believe it important to closely consult with Japan on the DPRK issue.

On February 29, the State Department announced that the DPRK had agreed to implement a moratorium on its long-range missile launches, nuclear tests and nuclear activities at the Yongbyon nuclear facility, including its uranium enrichment activities. The DPRK also agreed to allow IAEA inspectors to verify and monitor the moratorium on its Yongbyon uranium enrichment activities and confirm the disablement of its 5-megawatt nuclear reactor and associated facilities.

"This is a modest step in the right direction, and we will be watching closely and judging the DPRK's leaders by their actions," Clinton said.

Separately, U.S. and DPRK negotiators also recently concluded discussions on administrative details concerning the proposed U.S. nutritional assistance program to the DPRK. The 240,000-metric-ton program includes strict verification measures to ensure that U.S. nutritional assistance will reach those most in need of it.

"Our team just met in Beijing with DPRK officials to discuss the administrative details of this program, and we are working to move it forward soon," she said.

The secretary noted that on March 15 the U.S.-Republic of Korea free trade agreement will take effect, and "we believe that this agreement will create tens of thousands of jobs in both of our countries."

The United States and the Republic of Korea are building a global partnership, she said.

"Korea is an economic, political strategic leader not only in the Asia-Pacific but around the world," Clinton said.

Kim said the government of the Republic of Korea welcomes the results of the recent U.S.-DPRK discussions and "appreciated the close ROK-U.S. coordination that was intact throughout the dialogue process between Washington and Pyongyang."

In their talks, Kim said, Clinton told him "there will not be a fundamental improvement of relations between Washington and Pyongyang without an improvement of

inter-Korean relations, and we both agreed that dialogue should be promoted and relationship improved between the two Koreas."

The alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States is "in its best-ever shape," Kim said, and it has been "the cornerstone of peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia for the last 60 years, based on our common values and convictions, namely, free democracy and market economy."

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