

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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President Obama Orders Sanctions on More Russian Officials over Crimea	1
U.S. Clean Transport Program Being Adopted by Trading Partners	1
Mrs. Obama Goes to China, Invites U.S. Students Along Virtually	2
Amazon Inhales More Carbon than It Emits, NASA Finds.....	2
Movement to Save Syria's Children.....	3
Hagel Assures Malaysian Counterpart of U.S. Commitment to Search.....	4
Secretary Kerry Defends Foreign Policy Budget During Busy Week of Diplomacy	4

President Obama Orders Sanctions on More Russian Officials over Crimea

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr. | Staff Writer |
20 March 2014

Washington – President Obama says the United States, working closely with European allies, is imposing more sanctions on senior Russian officials and others for their involvement in the Crimean crisis in Ukraine.

“Over the last several days, we’ve continued to be deeply concerned by events in Ukraine,” Obama said at a March 20 White House press briefing. “We’ve seen an illegal referendum in Crimea, an illegitimate move by the Russians to annex Crimea, and dangerous risks of escalation, including threats to Ukrainian personnel in Crimea and threats to southern and eastern Ukraine as well.”

“We’re taking these steps as part of our response to what Russia has already done in Crimea,” Obama said. “At the same time, the world is watching with grave concern as Russia has positioned its military in a way that could lead to further incursions.”

The United States expanded sanctions that target 20 individuals inside and outside the government, and a private Russian bank, Bank Rossiya, because of their involvement or direct support in the Crimean crisis. The latest round of penalties follows the first set of sanctions levied March 17 against 11 high-ranking Russian and Crimean officials.

In a March 16 referendum that was illegal under the Ukrainian Constitution, Crimean officials reported overwhelming approval of breaking away from Ukraine and joining Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin is completing annexation of the Crimean Peninsula despite objections from Ukraine, the European community and the United States.

“We’ve been working closely with our European partners to develop more severe actions that could be taken if Russia continues to escalate the situation,” Obama said.

Obama warned Russia that he has signed a new executive order that gives the United States the authority to impose greater penalties not just on individual Russian officials but also on key sectors of the Russian economy. Obama acknowledged that additional sanctions would have a significant negative impact on the Russian economy, and also could be disruptive to the global economy.

“However, Russia must know that further escalation will only isolate it further from the international community,” Obama said.

The president also reinforced a message Vice President Biden delivered to Polish and Baltic leaders over the past two days of America’s unwavering support for the NATO alliance. Obama said the 28 members of the alliance are bound to one another by an “Article 5 commitment to defend one another, and by a set of shared values.”

The United States has already announced increased support for Eastern European allies, and will continue to strengthen NATO’s collective defense, Obama said. “We will step up our cooperation with Europe on economic and energy issues as well,” he added.

U.S. Clean Transport Program Being Adopted by Trading Partners

19 March 2014

Washington – A voluntary partnership between a U.S. federal agency and transport companies that has saved more than 120 million barrels of oil and \$16.8 billion in fuel costs in its 10 years is being adopted by major U.S. trading partners.

The program, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) SmartWay Transport Partnership, is celebrating 10 years as a market-driven initiative that helps businesses move goods in the cleanest, most energy-efficient way possible, saving money while protecting public health and fighting climate change. In addition to the oil and cost saving, SmartWay has eliminated 51.6 million metric tons of carbon dioxide pollution, EPA said March 19 in a posting on its website.

EPA said the program recently expanded into Canada, “which will allow U.S. businesses to access one seamless cross-border program with the nation’s largest trading partner.” And SmartWay has inspired other large U.S. trade partners, including China and Mexico, to initiate similar green freight programs. These programs will make it easier for multinational companies to understand the environmental effect of transporting their goods, or their global goods movement footprint, EPA said.

The SmartWay program is a public-private initiative between EPA, large and small trucking companies, rail carriers, logistics companies, commercial manufacturers, retailers, and other federal and state agencies. Its purpose is to improve fuel efficiency and the environmental performance (reduction of both greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution) of the goods movement supply chains.

The program helps businesses move more goods more kilometers with lower emissions and less energy use by helping accelerate the availability, adoption and market penetration of advanced fuel efficient technologies and operational practices in the freight supply chain, while lowering costs and improving environmental

performance.

SmartWay was launched in February 2004 with 15 charter partners, “freight sector business leaders that shared and supported the initial vision of moving freight more efficiently, saving money on fuel costs and advancing fuel efficient technologies,” EPA said. Since then, the program has grown to more than 3,000 partners, including some of the nation’s largest freight shippers, such as Best Buy Co. Inc., Hewlett Packard, Lowe’s, Home Depot and Sharp Electronics. Recently, General Motors and the U.S. Postal Service have joined the program.

Leading such a global sustainability effort requires ongoing innovation and collaboration with multiple freight industry sectors, EPA said. As an example, the agency said this year SmartWay will offer a first-of-its-kind environmental assessment tool for the inland barge industry.

“SmartWay’s success over the past decade means cleaner air for Americans to breathe, and also lower shipping costs for businesses — a win-win,” said Janet McCabe, acting assistant administrator for EPA’s Office of Air and Radiation. “The partnership uses innovative technology to help national and multinational corporations operate a more connected, clean and climate-friendly global freight network.”

Mrs. Obama Goes to China, Invites U.S. Students Along Virtually

By Jane Morse | Staff Writer | 18 March 2014

Washington — First lady Michelle Obama is traveling to China, and plans to take along — virtually — as many U.S. students as want to share her experiences.

“I’ll be posting a daily travel blog, complete with videos and photos, and I’ll be taking — and answering — questions from kids across America as I go,” Obama says on the White House Web page for her China visit. “I look forward to sharing with you the stories of the students I meet, as well as the interesting facts I learn about Chinese history and culture.”

“With more than 1.3 billion people, China is the most populous country on Earth, and it plays an important role on the world stage,” Obama says, adding that “it’s critically important that young people like you learn about what’s going on not just here in America, but around the world.”

During her March 19–26 visit, which will take her to Beijing, Xi’an and Chengdu, the first lady will be focusing on the power of education, both in her own life and in the lives of young people in both countries, says a White House release. Obama has, in her role as first lady,

emphasized the importance of education for personal success. Her own parents were working-class minorities who, although they never went to college themselves, encouraged her to complete college and launch a professional career.

In Beijing, the first lady will meet with Peng Liyuan, the first lady of China, and will give a speech at the Stanford Center at Peking University, where she will meet with Chinese and American students. Her second speech will be in Chengdu at a secondary school known for its technology and its outreach efforts to students in rural areas.

Accompanying Obama will be her daughters, Malia and Sasha, as well as their grandmother Marian Robinson, Obama’s mother.

China is the fifth most popular destination for American students studying abroad, says Tina Tchen, Obama’s chief of staff and herself a Chinese American. “We have about 200,000 Chinese students studying in the U.S., more than from any other country,” she said in a March 17 press briefing on Obama’s trip to China. Some 20,000 American students are now studying in China, a number that President Obama hopes to increase via his 100,000 Strong Initiative, which he first launched in 2009, Tchen said.

If young Americans are able to understand China, it will be “invaluable experience,” according to Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes.

“The relationship between the United States and China is really as important as any relationship in the world,” he said at the March 17 press briefing. China, he noted, is the second-largest economy in the world and the United States’ fastest-growing trading partner. “And it’s also a country we cooperate with on a whole host of international issues,” he said.

While Obama’s focus during her trip to China will be on people-to-people relations, Rhodes noted that at about the same time President Obama will meet with China’s President Xi Jinping at the Nuclear Security Summit in the Hague.

Amazon Inhales More Carbon than It Emits, NASA Finds

19 March 2014

Washington — A NASA-led study seven years in the making has confirmed that natural forests in the Amazon remove more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than they emit, therefore reducing global warming. This finding resolves a long-standing debate about a key component of the overall carbon balance of the Amazon

basin.

The Amazon's carbon balance is a matter of life and death: Living trees take carbon dioxide out of the air as they grow, and dead trees put the greenhouse gas back into the air as they decompose. The new study, published in *Nature Communications* on March 18, is the first to measure tree deaths caused by natural processes throughout the Amazon forest, even in remote areas where no data have been collected at ground level, NASA said in a March 18 press release.

Fernando Espírito-Santo of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, lead author of the study, created new techniques to analyze satellite and other data. He found that, each year, dead Amazonian trees emit an estimated 1.7 billion metric tons of carbon to the atmosphere. To compare this with Amazon carbon absorption, the researchers used censuses of forest growth and different modeling scenarios that accounted for uncertainties. In every scenario, carbon absorption by living trees outweighed emissions from the dead ones, indicating that the prevailing effect in natural forests of the Amazon is absorption.

Until now, scientists had been able to estimate the Amazon's carbon balance only from limited observations in small forest areas called plots. On these plots, the forest removes more carbon than it emits, but the scientific community has been vigorously debating how well the plots represent all the natural processes in the huge Amazon region. That debate began with the discovery in the 1990s that large areas of the forest can be killed off by intense storms in events called blowdowns.

Espírito-Santo said that the idea for the study arose from a 2006 workshop where scientists from several nations came together to identify NASA satellite instruments that might help them better understand the carbon cycle of the Amazon. In the years since then, he worked with 21 co-authors in five nations to measure the carbon impacts of tree deaths in the Amazon from all natural causes – from large-area blowdowns to single trees that died of old age. He used airborne lidar data, satellite images, and a 10-year set of plot measurements collected by the University of Leeds, England, under the leadership of Emanuel Gloor and Oliver Phillips. He estimates that he himself spent a year-and-a-half doing fieldwork in the Amazon.

"It was a difficult and audacious study, and only Espírito-Santo's dedication made it possible," said Michael Keller, a research scientist at the U.S. Forest Service and co-author of the study.

Correlating satellite and airborne-instrument data with ground observations, Espírito-Santo and his colleagues devised methods to identify dead trees in different types

of remotely sensed images. For example, fallen trees create a gap in the forest canopy that can be measured by lidar on research aircraft, and dead wood changes the colors in a satellite optical image. The researchers then scaled up their techniques so they could be applied to satellite and airborne data for parts of the Amazon with no corresponding ground data.

"We found that large natural disturbances – the sort not captured by plots – have only a tiny effect on carbon cycling throughout the Amazon," said Sassan Saatchi of JPL, also a co-author. Each year, about 2 percent of the entire Amazon forest dies of natural causes. The researchers found that only about 0.1 percent of those deaths are caused by blowdowns.

This study looked only at natural processes in Amazonia, not at the results of human activities such as logging and deforestation, which vary widely and rapidly with changing political and social conditions.

The other institutions participating in the study are the University of New Hampshire, Durham; the universities of Leeds and Nottingham and Oxford University, England; James Cook University, Cairns, Australia; U.S. Forest Service International Institute of Tropical Forestry, Puerto Rico; EMBRAPA Satellite Monitoring Center, Campinas, Brazil; National Institute for Research in Amazonia, Manaus, Brazil; EMBRAPA Eastern Amazonia, Santarém, Brazil; National Institute for Space Research (INPE), São José dos Campos, Brazil; the Missouri Botanical Garden, Oxapampa, Peru; and the Carnegie Institute for Science, Stanford, California.

Movement to Save Syria's Children

18 March 2014

This essay by Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration Anne C. Richard and Special Adviser on Global Youth Issues Zeenat Rahman was originally published on the State Department's Dipnote blog on March 14.

Saving Syria and Its Children

By Anne C. Richard and Zeenat Rahman

On February 10, the children at a United Nations school in Muzeirib, Syria, were among an ever shrinking group of kids still able to attend school amid a conflict that has driven 3 million students away from classrooms. But then reality, in the form of an explosion, reportedly from an air-to-ground strike, ripped through the windows and changed their lives forever.

Forty school children were injured that day in an incident that garnered few headlines. Eight days later on, another explosion struck a school in Muzeirib, killing five school

children and 13 adults, and maiming 20 more.

These incidents are only two examples in what has become an unremitting onslaught against a generation of Syrian children. As we commemorate the third anniversary of the Syria crisis on March 15, we urge you to join the movement to save Syria's children and youth.

We have seen firsthand how this war has ravaged the lives of young Syrians. In a trip to Jordan in January, we met a father who broke down describing the loss of his 9-year-old son, a young girl who had lost use of her legs, and a young man who had lost his brother in a chemical attack. Many refugees had fled the shifting violence repeatedly, often having to leave family members behind in the process.

The numbers of children affected by the war can be hard to conceptualize. Some 3 million of Syria's children are out of school. More than 10,000 kids killed. Of the more than 2.5 million Syrian refugees, half are children. Imagine cities of children and their families needing food, shelter, warmth, and attention to their mental and physical wounds — not to mention getting back to school.

If the shocking scope of this tragedy is not enough, here are several other reasons to become part of the movement to save Syria's children and help get assistance to those in need:

1. Within Syria, international assistance is keeping millions of people alive, delivering food and water, operating schools, and providing medical care.
2. International aid helps the countries neighboring Syria that are generously hosting millions of refugees. These countries need our help to ensure there are enough hospital beds and school desks to support the large number of refugees.
3. Syria's children and youth — the country's future leaders — cannot afford to be overlooked and left behind.

This is why the Department of State and USAID have joined aid agencies and international organizations like UNICEF and UNHCR to raise awareness about the impacts of the Syria crisis on children and youth through the No Lost Generation initiative.

It is also why we are urging you to spend a few moments today to become a champion of Syria's children by visiting championthechildrenofsyria.org or following #ChildrenofSyria on Twitter.

As the largest single donor nation to the Syria crisis, the United States has provided more than \$1.7 billion in humanitarian assistance to support critical humanitarian

efforts since the start of the crisis. This is in addition to the millions in U.S. bilateral assistance to support communities hosting refugees in Lebanon and Jordan.

But much more should be done. Citizens and governments around the world need to become more engaged, by speaking up for peace and by supporting reputable aid organizations.

It is not too late to make a difference. All of us can be a part of the movement to help realize these hopes. Why not you?

Hagel Assures Malaysian Counterpart of U.S. Commitment to Search

18 March 2014

This article was originally published on the Defense Department website on March 18.

Washington — Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel spoke with Malaysian Defense Minister Hishammuddin Tun Hussein on March 17 to discuss the ongoing search for Malaysian Airlines Flight 370.

In a statement summarizing the phone call, assistant Pentagon press secretary Carl Woog said Hagel conveyed that the United States remains fully committed to working with the Malaysian government to find the plane and that the U.S. Navy has re-tasked reconnaissance aircraft to search the Indian Ocean's southern corridor.

"Secretary Hagel noted that this search mission is in many ways unprecedented and thanked Minister Hishammuddin for his government's collaboration with international partners," Woog said.

Hagel also told Hishammuddin that he looks forward to seeing the minister at the upcoming U.S.-Association of Southeast Asian Nations defense forum in Honolulu, Woog said, and noted the meeting will provide a good opportunity to continue discussions on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, among other areas of mutual concern.

Secretary Kerry Defends Foreign Policy Budget During Busy Week of Diplomacy

By Sonya Weakley | Staff Writer | 14 March 2014

Washington — During a busy week for international diplomacy, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry attended a series of congressional committee hearings March 12-13 to explain his foreign policy objectives to the lawmakers who will determine how much money he will have to pay for them.

President Obama's 2015 budget request to Congress

includes \$46.2 billion for the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development, the department's development assistance component. The department's 2014 allocation was approximately \$46.8 billion.

In opening remarks March 13, Senator Patrick Leahy, a Democrat from Vermont who is chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, cited a few of the challenges in deciding how to fund foreign services.

"Violence and discrimination against women; shortages of water, energy and food; climate change; religious extremism; the trafficking in arms, drugs, people and wildlife — there is no issue that the secretary [of state] or this subcommittee can ignore," Leahy said.

Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, the subcommittee's ranking Republican, commended Kerry's efforts. "I don't know how many miles a month you travel, but nobody can ever say that John Kerry has not been trying," Graham said.

In response to questions about shifting budget priorities, Kerry pointed out the value of strong diplomatic relationships. In many areas, "it's not our economic assistance that is our lever. It's this relationship."

Financial resources should be focused "where our economic and security interests converge," such as strengthening "partnerships in the East Asia and Pacific region, ... bolstering our bedrock alliances with South Korea and Japan" and developing "deeper partnerships with Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines and others as they assume greater security roles," he said.

Other security priorities are assisting France in fighting terrorism in the Maghreb, ending drug trafficking in Central Asia and working with the Republic of Korea and other partners to ensure the security of the Korean Peninsula.

Known for his visible involvement in large-scale security crises, Kerry said much of the impact of foreign operations is hidden: "There are just so many different parts of the world where people don't see how America has made the difference, but we are making the difference in place after place."

Success, he said, occurs over time "where we support freedom of religion [and] protecting universal rights of people to practice their faith freely. ... It isn't just what we do in the budget, it's an essential part of who we are as Americans."

Kerry said the budget would maintain "investments in

stronger people-to-people ties, educational exchange and countering violent extremism." It also would contribute \$1.35 billion to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. An additional \$5.9 billion would fund overseas contingency operations, enabling the department to assist in humanitarian and peacekeeping efforts.

Supporting human rights, building stronger civil societies and providing development assistance are among "the surest ways to prevent the kind of horrible human tragedy we see in Syria today," Kerry said. "There is simply no way the richest and most powerful nation in the world can simply look away. It is both a moral and security imperative."

The battle to end discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people will continue to be uphill, he said. "There are 80 countries that have similar types of laws ... on the books. And we deal with all of them," Kerry said.

A former longtime senator and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Kerry described his first year as secretary of state as eye-opening.

"The one thing that struck me more than anything else in the course of the last year ... [is] the degree to which [U.S.] leadership does make a difference," he said. "Without any doubt, more deeply than I ever believed it when I chaired the Foreign Relations Committee. ... It's impossible to calculate the dangers in a world without American leadership."

Kerry also testified before a House appropriations subcommittee March 12 and the House Foreign Affairs Committee March 13. A scheduled Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing March 12 was postponed so Kerry could attend President Obama's meeting with Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk at the White House.

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