

American

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President Obama: India Is a Critical Center of Influence

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama says that a critical pillar of his national security strategy involves deepening cooperation with 21st-century centers of influence — “and that includes India.”

“The United States values our partnership not because of where India is on a map, but because of what we share and where we can go together,” Obama said June 3 at a special reception for Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna and his delegation. Krishna and senior Indian officials were in Washington for the four-day U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue.

“India is indispensable to the future that we seek,” the president added. Since his administration began 16 months ago, a third of the Cabinet has traveled to India, and that helps explain the depth of the strategic dialogue between the two nations. The Obama administration has begun using strategic dialogues as a means for deeper consultations and commitment among select nations.

Obama also announced that he will visit India for talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his government in early November. Singh was invited to Washington in November 2009 in the Obama administration’s first state visit, during which he asked Obama to visit India.

“Prime Minister Singh and I are very proud to take credit for our two nations forging an unprecedented partnership through this strategic dialogue,” Obama said. The U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue was first announced by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in July 2009.

STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

In addition to advancing global security and stability, delegates from India and the United States met in 18 dialogues during the four-day meeting to expand cooperation in trade and investment, science and technology, infrastructure investment, environmental sustainability, climate change, energy security, education, agriculture, food security, health care and empowerment. The talks underscored the specific purpose of this session of the dialogue — which will rotate between New Delhi and Washington — to launch the process, identify issues that will require more study, and determine how to address them.

In the area of security, Clinton thanked the Indian government for its support and efforts in Afghanistan with contributions to reconstruction, capacity building and development. Krishna said that India and the United States have a convergent goal of a stable, peaceful, pluralistic and democratic Afghanistan that protects its people and threatens no others in the region.

Clinton and Krishna pledged full implementation of the 2008 civil nuclear cooperation accord. The two reiterated that nuclear energy can make a significant contribution to building a sustainable and clean energy future.

Trade and investment garnered considerable attention during the talks because of the rising level of two-way trade, reaching more than \$60 billion in 2009. A portion of the talks in Washington included the U.S.-India Business Council because of the intense interest among American and Indian companies.

India is among the members of the Group of 20 advanced economies. Krishna and Clinton acknowledged during the talks that the current global economic recovery is still fragile and that, without sustained international support and cooperation, it could falter. The two leaders called for a balanced and ambitious conclusion to World Trade Organization development efforts that are intended to liberalize global trade, reduce national barriers and resist protectionism.

The two nations also strengthened bilateral cooperation in three areas — broad economic policy, financial sector reforms and infrastructure financing.

President Obama Postpones Asia Visit with “Deep Regret”

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama has had to postpone for a second time his planned trip to Australia and Indonesia in order to oversee continuing efforts to stop a massive oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico and clean up the environmental damage.

According to a statement released by White House press secretary Robert Gibbs June 3, the president telephoned Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to express his “deep regret” over the need to postpone the visit.

“The president looked forward to rescheduling so that he can visit both countries soon,” Gibbs said, adding that Obama “underscored his commitment to our close

alliance with Australia and our deepening partnership with Indonesia.”

Gibbs added that Obama will be holding full bilateral meetings with both leaders in late June on the margins of the meeting of the Group of 20 industrialized nations in Toronto.

According to President Yudhoyono’s spokesman, the Indonesian leader “fully understands” why Obama needs to remain to deal with “the worst environment disaster in the history of the United States.”

“Yudhoyono said he himself would find it hard to leave the country where there’s a disaster at home, for example a tsunami,” spokesman Dino Patti Djalal told reporters June 4.

According to press reports, between 22 million and 47 million gallons of crude oil have leaked into the Gulf since British Petroleum’s Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded on April 20. The hole in the ocean floor reportedly is spewing out oil at a rate of thousands of barrels a day, generating the worst oil spill in U.S. history, with increasingly severe catastrophic impacts on the environment and the economic life of the U.S. states bordering the Gulf.

This is the second time President Obama has had to cancel his planned travel to Indonesia and Australia. The previous trip, which also included a stop in Guam, had been scheduled for March 21-26, but Obama decided he needed to be in Washington when Congress took a final vote on domestic health care legislation, one of the centerpieces of his domestic agenda.

The president has personal ties to Indonesia, where he lived for four years in his youth with his mother, stepfather and sister. During his visit, he plans to sign a new, strategic Comprehensive Partnership Agreement covering a range of issues, including economic ties, investment and trade, food security, science and technology, educational exchanges, social issues, politics and military cooperation in a critically important geographic region.

Indonesia has also been a critically important U.S. partner on security issues such as fighting terrorism, as well as Obama’s broader efforts to advance relations with the Muslim world.

Secretary Clinton Travels to South America, Caribbean

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton will hold talks with regional partners from across South America, Central America and the Caribbean during the annual meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) being held in Peru.

Emphasis at the 40th OAS General Assembly meeting in Lima is on enhanced regional security and cooperation, says Ambassador Carmen Lomellin, the U.S. permanent representative to the OAS. The General Assembly meets June 6-8.

“It’s creating an environment in all of our member states where all of our citizens can live lives free of violence,” Lomellin said. “Within that chapeau you have the drug trafficking, the trafficking in persons, you have all these issues that affect people’s daily lives.”

At a briefing June 4, Assistant Secretary of State Arturo Valenzuela said that the conference declaration will address questions of security across the Americas in a broad sense. Some of the elements will include confidence-building measures between countries, ensuring peaceful relations among members, calls for greater investment in programs aimed at economic development, social reforms, and less funding for military spending programs, said Valenzuela, who is the assistant secretary for Western Hemisphere affairs.

Another issue of importance this year will be the growth of regional democracy. Nine years ago in Lima, the OAS approved the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which has become a guiding light for the OAS, Lomellin said. “So democracy is, will continue to be, and should be a priority for this organization,” she added.

The OAS ministers will also be conducting an exhaustive review of the mandates that it has received, Lomellin said. “Monies and contributions are really being diminished. So we have to figure out — we as member states have to figure out — what are the priorities, what is the value added for whatever it is that the OAS is going to do with it, [and] go in the direction,” she added.

After the OAS meeting of hemispheric government ministers, Clinton travels to Ecuador, where she is expected to deliver a major foreign policy speech at the Centro Cultural Metropolitano in Quito June 8, Valenzuela said. The Metropolitano, which is owned by the city, is next door to the presidential palace in the historic center of Quito, and it houses a library, a number

of exhibition areas and museums.

Clinton travels to Colombia for meetings with government leaders and with the two presidential candidates, Antanas Mockus and Juan Manuel Santos, Valenzuela said. "In Bogota, of course, she will be discussing elements of the bilateral relationship with Colombia, as well as with the two candidates," he said. Colombia is going through an electoral process; the first round was held May 30 and the next round is June 20.

On June 9, Clinton will hold meetings with leaders of the Caribbean nations in Barbados, which follows up on a recent meeting in Washington on the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, he added. The CBSI is the Obama administration's effort to work with countries of the Caribbean to address the problems of crime, violence and narco-trafficking they face, Valenzuela said.

Participation in U.S. Islamic Games Continues to Grow

Regional event in New Jersey draws largest number of athletes to date

By M. Scott Bortot
Staff Writer

Washington — The Islamic Games are on a mission to "create a body that is strong on the inside and strong on the outside."

If turnout at the latest Islamic Games is any indication, this mission is resonating with a growing number of Muslim Americans.

Muslim athletes gathered May 29-31 to compete in the fourth annual regional Islamic Games. Held in South Brunswick, New Jersey, this year's Islamic Games in the Northeast attracted 1,700 competitors, making it the largest yet.

Salaudeen Nausrudeen, president and co-founder of the Islamic Games of North America, said this year's regional games grew by 20 percent more than 2009.

"I think the Islamic Games have gone beyond just a weekend thing; it has become something the Muslim community looks forward to, and not only looks forward to, but they plan for it," Nausrudeen told America.gov.

Nausrudeen said expanding interest in the games reflects the growth of America's Muslim community, and not only in terms of population.

"The infrastructure within the Muslim community has grown," Nausrudeen said. For example, about 20 Islamic schools from the Northeast sent athletes to this year's games. "There is a lot more money that is available, and there is a lot more opportunity to do things because Muslim communities are much more organized than they were 20 years ago or 15 years ago," he said.

Held at a secondary school, competitions included team events like basketball and soccer as well as individual events, track and field, arm wrestling and martial arts. Many athletes are teenagers, and organizers held women's basketball and martial arts indoors — out of view from men — in response to concerns expressed by parents. Area vendors supplied halal food, and action halted for prayer breaks.

The games in New Jersey are part of regional Islamic competitions held around the country. Islamic Games encompassing the American Midwest and Southeast are held at different times of the year. The Midwest games this year will be held in Dearborn, Michigan, from July 31 to August 1.

Athletes at the New Jersey event represented 32 national backgrounds from countries in the Arab world, Africa, South Asia and Bosnia. Open to people of all faiths, the games also featured religious diversity in individual and team sports.

"We have non-Muslim athletes in just about every event," Nausrudeen said. "We've had full teams of non-Muslims in the games."

Americans of other faiths played on Lubna Qazi-Chowdhry's husband's basketball team. Qazi-Chowdhry, a New Jersey-based attorney, said Muslim Americans today participate in society differently than did her parents' generation.

"We look to be more active in the community and socialize," Qazi-Chowdhry said. She said the games lift the spirits of young Muslims whose religion is sometimes negatively stereotyped. "Events like this also help build self-esteem and spirit for everyone involved."

New Jersey high school senior Mona Mostafa is a four-year veteran of the games. Mostafa plays volleyball, basketball and soccer for her team, Egy Fresh. This year, her team of mostly Egyptian Americans placed second in volleyball. For her, the games are more about friendship than competition.

"I don't usually see my team all the time so it is kind of like really a get-together for my whole team," Mostafa said. "We work hard, but if we lose we are like, 'It's OK, we are just here to have fun together, all as one.'"

Qazi-Chowdhry, who said she proudly sponsored her husband's basketball team, is one of many local sponsors. Small business involvement in the games is part of a rising trend.

"We've also noticed that a lot of businesses are beginning to sponsor teams, which is good for us," Nausrudeen said. "Because it motivates teams and because it shows that there is integration in what we are doing with the rest of the community."

The Islamic Games originated as a sports gathering among friends, which included Nausrudeen, in the 1980s. Seeing value in organizing the community around sports, the friends held the first Islamic Games in 1987 and continued it until 1991, when they moved on to other projects.

"Everyone grew up and they thought that sport was just for playing, and it was put aside for a while," Nausrudeen said.

But in 2007, Nausrudeen brought the event back with a re-energized team and a stronger commitment. As a sign of the Muslim-American community's demand for the Islamic Games, Nausrudeen and his team are looking to add another region. Negotiations are under way for a Southwest region Islamic Games that would be held in Houston this November.

Nausrudeen said that someday nationwide Islamic Games will be held in America, but not yet.

"Our timeline right now is that we are just at the point where we are trying to stimulate and motivate the community, build an interest, build an appetite, within the Muslim community for sports and athletics for healthy lifestyles," he said. "Once that has adequately seeped into the communities, the next stage will automatically come where we will be able to compete on a national level."

Young People Must Create "Transformational Legacy" of Leadership

Obama staffer talks to students at "Teach Africa" Leadership Summit

By Charles W. Corey
Staff Writer

Washington — Young people must create a "transformational legacy" of leadership to improve the lives of people in Africa, the United States and worldwide, a White House official says.

Michael Blake, deputy associate director of the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs and Public Engagement, made that point June 3 as he spoke to students at the "Teach Africa" Leadership Summit, held at the U.S. Department of State.

"You have a moment to not just change a city, not just change a state, but change a world," he told the 300 young people gathered for the one-day meeting. "What happens in Africa, what happens in the world impacts what is happening here," he told the students, 10 of whom were selected from throughout the United States after writing essays on why they were interested in Africa.

"Don't let today be the only day where you learn about Africa," he told the students.

Very often, he said, Africa is talked about negatively and unfairly. He went on to tell part of his personal story to illustrate how inaccurate stereotypes are.

Blake, who is of Jamaican ancestry, said: "Jamaica is not just about Air Jamaica or the vacations that you see ... and it is not about the violence that you see on TV. It is about a beautiful country with beautiful people.

"I was born and raised in the Bronx, New York. The Bronx is not just about the Yankees [baseball team]. It is not just about hip-hop. It is a place that has now produced the first Hispanic [U.S.] Supreme Court justice [Sonia Sotomayor] in our history. It is a place ... like Jamaica, but more importantly like Africa, that so many times people think negative things [about] first."

That has to change, he said. "You are the ones, we are the ones that have to be part of changing that dynamic and what happens here in this country because if we don't do it, who will? I am here today to tell you that I see a world of what we can be and I see that world because I see you."

Blake, who is 27 years old, was born with a heart murmur on Christmas night, 1982. "My mother was too sick to have me," he told his audience.

"I don't just stand here before you in a nice suit to tell you it is going to be easy and speaking as if I just came from some rosy circumstance.

"I stand before you to tell you that you may hear these things — that you are young, and that you may be inexperienced or not ready. Well, then tell them that you saw this young brother named Michael Blake who just a few years ago was leaving the Bronx to go to school, figuring out where my path would be.

"For some reason, as mama would tell me, 'we went from no house in Jamaica to the White House in Washington D.C.'"

Blake told the students, "Global problems require global solutions, but to have global solutions, you need global leaders." He called on the students to take away four key words from his remarks: "I see a world."

"What is the world that you see?" he asked rhetorically.

Responding to his own question, he said: "I see a world of economic prosperity, where the only time someone talks about Africa should not just be Blood Diamonds, the movie. It should be about the investments that we make, like the African Growth and Opportunity Act [AGOA] Forum that is going to be happening this summer and how we have trade and investment relations between the United States and Africa so that we can expand and do new things."

But more important, he said, "I see a world and I see an Africa in peace and prosperity. I am tired of seeing the pain and I am tired of seeing the heartache." But for this to happen, he said, there must be "transformational leadership," leadership that transforms the world.

He called on the students to keep their heads up and have the confidence to see the job through. "I am tired of seeing our heads down. ... You can't see a world with your head down. You cannot move forward and progressively with your head down. Everyone here in this room has been called here because you are a leader. Not just a regular leader but a transformational leader."

Blake worked on the campaign trail with President Obama as the deputy political director and constituency outreach director in the key Midwestern state of Iowa. "When ... people were wondering if we would make it," he said, "President Obama addressed his staff saying 'When I win' and not 'If I win.' He said, 'When I win, children who come after our children will truly believe that they can be anything they want to be.'"

That, he said, is the kind of "transformational leadership" thinking that is required of young people today.

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