

American

NEWS & VIEWS

A Daily Newsletter from Public Affairs, American Embassy

March 15, 2011

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President Obama Seeks to Strengthen U.S.-Salvadoran Relations

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — The United States and El Salvador have enjoyed strong political and economic ties for more than three decades. President Obama's visit during a five-day, three-nation trip to Latin America that begins March 19 is designed to underscore the value of that relationship, the White House said recently.

Obama visits Brazil and Chile then concludes the trip in San Salvador, El Salvador, March 22-23.

White House press secretary Jay Carney said the president and first lady Michelle Obama will meet with the leaders and speak to the people of these countries to discuss a broad range of issues including economic prosperity and job creation through increased trade and partnerships, energy and security cooperation, shared values and other regional and global concerns.

"The trip will provide an opportunity to engage key bilateral partners, to highlight the president's engagement with the hemisphere, and to advance our efforts to work as equal partners to address the basic challenges facing the people of the Americas," Carney said earlier in a White House statement.

Assistant Secretary of State Arturo Valenzuela said in congressional testimony last month that U.S. economic engagement with the Western Hemisphere extends far beyond foreign assistance for Latin America and the Caribbean. The Western Hemisphere is one of the critical economic partners for the United States, and many of its neighbors are also among its top trading partners.

The United States has launched comprehensive trade agreements with most of its important Latin American partners, especially through the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), which includes El Salvador.

"Trade is one of the more enduring issues in contemporary U.S.-Latin America relations," said J.F. Hornbeck, a specialist in international trade and finance for the U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS). "Latin America is far from the largest U.S. regional trade partner, but historically is the fastest growing one."

The CAFTA-DR trade agreement, which was signed in 2004, includes Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. According to the U.S. Trade Representative's Office, this trading bloc represents the third-largest U.S. export

market in Latin America behind Mexico and Brazil.

U.S. exports to the CAFTA-DR countries were valued at \$19.5 billion in 2009, and combined two-way trade in 2009 between the United States and CAFTA-DR countries was \$37.9 billion.

At his June 2009 inauguration, which Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton attended, Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes declared his intention to expand, strengthen and renew El Salvador's relations with the United States. Funes cited Obama as the type of progressive leader he hoped to emulate in his administration, according to a report by Clare Ribando Seelke and Peter Meyer, who are Latin America analysts with the CRS.

Funes has spoken with Obama several times since his election. The two first met at the Fifth Summit of the Americas in April 2009, but he has also held consultations with Obama at the White House.

One aspect of the U.S. relationship with El Salvador and the other CAFTA-DR nations is improving the flow of trade through enhanced regulatory cooperation and programs to build trade capacity, Valenzuela says.

In addition to economic trade, El Salvador has worked closely with U.S. counternarcotics programs in Latin America, Seelke and Meyer said. It is viewed as a shared problem.

"In 2008, El Salvador's National Civilian Police seized 1.35 metric tons of cocaine, 430 kilograms of marijuana and 8.4 kilograms of heroin," the CRS report said. "U.S. counternarcotics assistance focuses on improving the interdiction capabilities of Salvadoran law enforcement agencies; increasing transparency, efficiency and respect for human rights within the criminal justice system; and aiding Salvadoran efforts to fight transnational gangs."

El Salvador is the home of the International Law Enforcement Academy, which provides police management and specialized training to the nations of the region.

Valenzuela, who is in charge of the State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, also said in congressional testimony that the United States is launching initiatives to expand social inclusion and provide support for marginalized groups.

"We also seek to advance gender equity through education, outreach and government-to-government dialogue," he said.

Citizen safety is also a goal that the United States seeks to

enhance through the Central America Regional Security Initiative, which has received \$260 million in the last year, Valenzuela said. This program and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative are central to U.S. and Latin American strategy to break the power, violence and impunity of the region's drug, gang and criminal organizations, he said.

White House on Violence in Yemen and Bahrain

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary
March 13, 2011

Statement from the Press Secretary on violence in Yemen and Bahrain

The United States strongly condemns the violence that has taken place in Yemen and Bahrain today. We urge the governments of these countries to show restraint, and to respect the universal rights of their people. We urge the government of Bahrain to pursue a peaceful and meaningful dialogue with the opposition rather than resorting to the use of force. In particular, we urge our GCC partners to show restraint and respect the rights of the people of Bahrain, and to act in a way that supports dialogue instead of undermining it.

U.S. Military, Civilian Forces Provide Aid for Japan

By MacKenzie C. Babb
Staff Writer

Washington — U.S. military and civilian forces are working with their Japanese counterparts to provide humanitarian relief in the aftermath of devastating earthquakes and a tsunami, according to General Burton Field, commander of U.S. Forces Japan.

"The U.S. military stands closely together with our ambassador, our embassy and our other U.S. agencies to provide the fullest possible support to both the people and the government of Japan," Field said March 14 in Tokyo. He and U.S. Ambassador John Roos held a press conference on U.S. aid to Japan following the earthquake and subsequent tsunami that hit March 11.

Field said the U.S. military response includes efforts from the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines. He called their coordinated efforts "tremendously impressive," and commended military personnel for their rapid, effective and "unbelievably caring" missions to save survivors.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is coordinating the U.S. government response to the disaster. Its Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance worked with the embassy in Tokyo to provide an initial \$100,000 in immediate disaster relief assistance, and has since provided more than \$640,000 to support the USAID

disaster assistance response teams on the ground.

USAID has deployed two urban search-and-rescue teams, comprised of about 150 personnel and 12 dogs trained to detect survivors. The teams landed March 13 at Misawa Air Base in northern Japan.

According to a March 13 statement from the White House, the U.S. departments of Energy, Health and Human Services, Defense and State, as well as the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, are working together to support their Japanese counterparts.

"We have offered our Japanese friends whatever assistance is needed as America will stand with Japan as they recover and rebuild," the press secretary's statement said.

General Field said there is "tremendous devastation" along much of the Japanese coastline, where the earthquake, its aftershocks and the tsunami have "wreaked havoc."

But even in the hardest-hit areas, he said, the Japanese people "are already beginning to dig their way out of this disaster, and are well on their way to establishing how they're going to recover and move on."

The Department of Defense said March 13 that U.S. troops stand ready to offer a wide range of equipment and air, sea and ground capability. They have already delivered more than 1,500 pounds (680 kilograms) of rice and bread to those most affected by the disaster.

U.S. Nuclear Experts Help Japanese in Reactor Accidents

By Charlene Porter
Staff Writer

Washington — Nuclear experts are on the relief team that the U.S. Agency for International Development sent to Japan after the March 11 earthquake, which triggered accidents at two nuclear power plants in the disaster area.

The nuclear reactors are designed to shut down automatically in an earthquake. But things went wrong in the powerful shake-up that rattled northeastern Japan. At the Fukushima Daiichi and Fukushima Daini facilities, the cooling systems meant to dissipate the intense heat of the reactor core failed. Explosions occurred at the Daiichi facility, though their cause is not clear.

The utility is pumping seawater into the plant to continue cooling the reactor to avoid a meltdown, the worst scenario in a nuclear accident. That's when the core becomes so intensely hot that it melts through containment structures and releases radiation into the

surrounding environment.

“We have some of the most expert people in this field in the world working for the [Nuclear Regulatory Commission],” said NRC Chairman Gregory Jaczko in an NRC news release. “We stand ready to assist in any way possible.”

The U.S.-based multinational conglomerate General Electric manufactured one of the reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi site and has offered technical assistance to the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), which operates the damaged facilities.

“Clearly, we are offering any kind of technical assistance to our customer TEPCO and the government of Japan as they go through the recovery efforts,” said GE Chief Executive Jeff Immelt. The executive made the comment while on a trip to New Delhi for discussions of the corporation’s future involvement in the expansion of nuclear power generation in India. A Reuters news service report from Delhi also says Immelt committed the company to a \$5 million contribution to relief efforts.

Asked by reporters what the Japanese accident could mean for future expansion of the nuclear industry, Immelt said: “It’s early days. Let people do exploration of what happened in Japan and let it take its course.”

The Japanese have ordered the evacuation of a 20-kilometer area around the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. The World Health Organization (WHO) puts the number of evacuees at more than 270,000.

The WHO also reports that 190 people were suspected of radiation exposure, but just 22 were confirmed to have detectable radiation levels.

Earthquake, tsunami, nuclear accident – the cascade of disaster striking Japan in recent days approaches epic proportions. And there may be more still to come. The Japan Meteorological Agency reports a 70 percent probability of a 7.0 magnitude earthquake occurring in the next few days.

U.S. Humanitarian Aid Reaching People Inside Libya, Refugees

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington – Although the security situation in Libya is preventing a U.S. disaster assistance response team (DART) from entering the country, Obama administration officials say U.S. humanitarian aid is arriving through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) there and is addressing health care and food security, which have been identified as the most urgent needs.

Speaking to reporters March 14, State Department Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees, and Migration Eric Schwartz and U.S. Agency for International Development Assistant Administrator Nancy Lindborg said the \$47 million that the United States has provided to help refugees and migrants fleeing the violence between the Libyan government and its political opponents is being used inside Libya as well as in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt.

Schwartz and Lindborg returned from a March 8–12 trip to Tunisia and Egypt, where they assessed the humanitarian needs.

“We are already and have been for some time now providing assistance directly inside of Libya through our NGO and other partners,” Lindborg said.

“One of the greatest concerns inside Libya is, first of all, health needs, both urgent and just the regular primary health care needs, and ongoing food security challenges, which is why the emphasis for work inside Libya has been on the health and on the food security needs,” she said.

Although there are serious concerns about the situation in the west of the country, in the rebel-held east, Lindborg said, “fortunately, because of the rapid mobilization of assistance ... some of the most immediate health and food needs were met. And we’re continuing to provide and watch as needs evolve and change.”

She said the United States has given the U.N.’s World Health Organization two emergency health kits, “each of which provides primary health care needs for a population of 10,000 for three months.” In addition, \$10 million in assistance has gone to the World Food Programme and is being targeted at those in Tunisia and Egypt who have been the most economically affected by the crisis, as well as people inside Libya.

“In Tunisia in particular ... they’re feeling the triple whammy of loss of tourism, loss of trade with Libya and loss of the remittances and the workers who worked there. And yet despite that, there is a tremendous outpouring of support by the Tunisian people themselves, as well as the government, to support those coming across the border,” she said.

U.S. government aid has also included \$7 million to the International Committee for the Red Cross, and an additional \$4 million to other NGO partners, she said.

The assistance is supporting primary health care, trauma-related health and medical assistance, and providing blankets, hygiene kits, water containers and high-energy biscuits, Lindborg said.

Schwartz said that since fighting began in late February, at least 140,000 people, mostly foreign workers, fled from Libya into Tunisia and an additional 110,000 or so fled to Egypt – creating “an enormous humanitarian challenge in the region.”

He added that there are about 17,000 foreign workers living in a camp on the Tunisian-Libyan border who are waiting to get transport to their home countries, and around 5,000 living in a camp on the Egyptian side.

“There are significant challenges there in terms of enhancing shelter in the border area, as well as providing for the needs of those who have come across who may not be able to ... go back to their countries of origin because they’re refugees,” he said.

Schwartz said he and Lindborg heard many reports and firsthand accounts of the difficulties many experienced leaving Libya. Many were robbed, had parts of their cellular phones confiscated and faced many checkpoints and restrictions as they tried to flee the violence, he said.

“People have just generally had a hell of a hard time getting out,” he said.

According to Lindborg, a DART team made up of 15 U.S. civilians is in the region and prepared to assess the humanitarian situation.

“They are working to ensure that we are fully coordinated ... with the international humanitarian assistance effort and to track urgent needs as they evolve,” she said, but due to continued concerns over the security situation, they have not yet entered Libya.

“As soon as the security situation permits, we will go in,” she said.

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