

Obama riding 'righteous wind' before polls

AFP, Henderson

Democrat Barack Obama promised a "new politics for a new time" and said he had a "righteous wind" at his back as he basked in hefty poll leads just three days before Tuesday's historic election.

But Obama's Republican White House rival John McCain fired off a lacerating critique of the Democratic nominee's national security credentials, saying he was unfit to navigate a dangerous world with untold lives at stake.

Meanwhile, after a mildly embarrassing revelation, Obama's campaign returned a financial donation from a Kenyan aunt who lives in Boston after questions were raised over her immigration status.

The rivals blitzed key battleground states on Saturday, in what has been Republican territory in recent elections, reflecting Obama's edge in most swing states and in national polls as the race careens to a close.

"Don't believe for a second that this election is over," Obama told 15,000 people in the balmy heat of the western battleground state of Nevada as his bid to become America's first black president reaches its climax.

"But I know this, Nevada, the

time for change has come. We have a righteous wind at our back," he said.

The Illinois senator, 47, once again tried to shackle McCain to President George W. Bush's legacy and warned his rival would resort to "slash and burn" tactics in the final hours.

But he said that the politics of division would not pull America out of its current financial crisis.

"We can steer ourselves out of this crisis -- with a new politics for a new time."

McCain, seeking to make Tuesday's election a referendum on whether his rival was fit to lead in a perilous age, raised sharp questions about Obama's readiness to be commander-in-chief.

Obama had shown some "impressive qualities," McCain, 72, said at a rally in Newport News, Virginia, but he argued his foe was the wrong choice for a dangerous world where "millions of lives" were at stake.

"The question is whether this is a man who has what it takes to protect America from Osama bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran, and other grave threats in the world," McCain said.

"And he has given you no reason to answer in the affirmative."

McCain also said Obama's economic plans would do little to stave off the slowdown after US growth lurched into negative territory in the last quarter to set the stage for a full-blown recession.

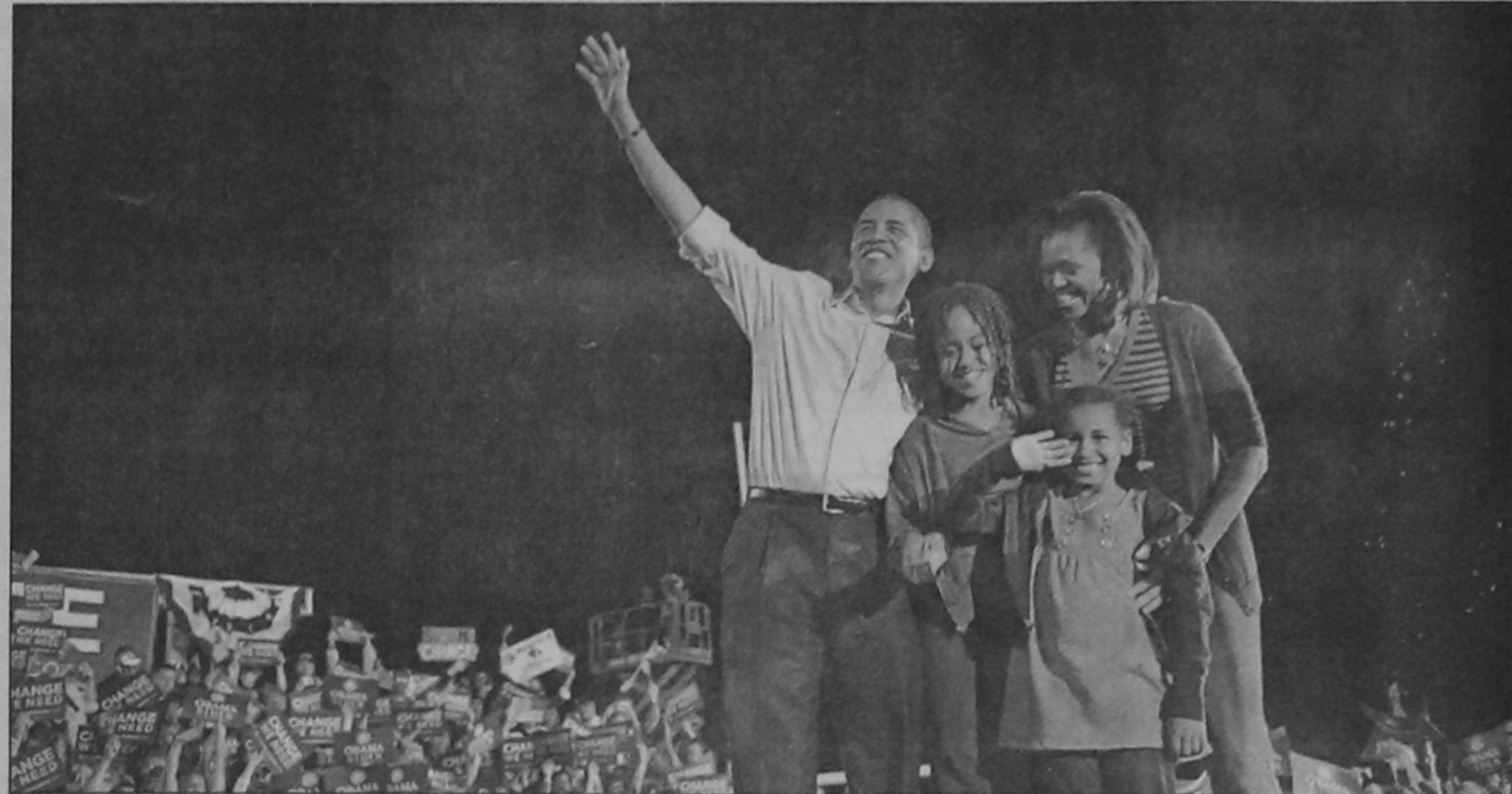
He said Obama's comments to Ohio tradesman Samuel Wurzelbacher alias "Joe the Plumber" in a campaign stop -- that it was good to "spread the wealth around" -- revealed his true intent.

"We've learned more about Senator Obama's real goals for our country in the last two weeks than we did in the last two years, and that's only because Joe the Plumber asked him a question," McCain said.

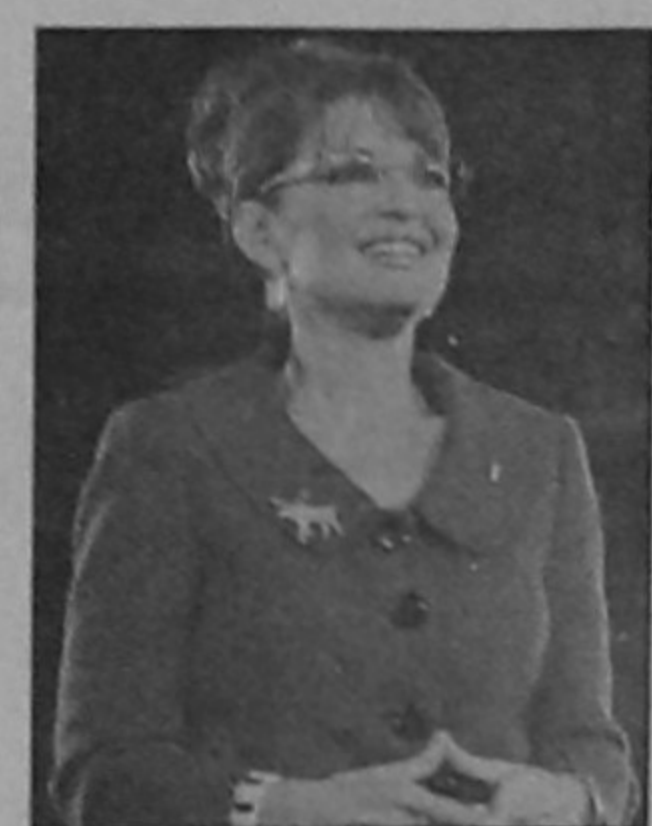
Latest daily tracking surveys suggested that Obama was in pole position heading into election day.

Rasmussen had the national race at 51 to 46 percent in favor of the Democrat. Gallup had Obama gaining momentum and leading 52 percent to 42 percent in two polls designed to reflect different scenarios of likely voters.

Obama headed from Nevada to Colorado, another Republican state in 2004 which polls show trending in his direction, before an evening rally in the midwestern bellwether of Missouri.



US Democratic presidential candidate Illinois Senator Barack Obama, his wife Michelle and daughters Sasha, 7, and Malia, 10, during a rally at JFK Stadium in Springfield, Missouri on Saturday.



Sarah Palin

Palin takes prank call from fake French president

AP, Toronto

Sarah Palin unwittingly took a prank call Saturday from a Canadian comedian posing as French President Nicolas Sarkozy and telling her she would make a good president someday.

"Maybe in eight years," replies a laughing Palin.

The Republican vice presidential nominee discusses politics, the perils of hunting with Vice President Dick Cheney, and Sarkozy's "beautiful wife," in a recording of the six-minute call released Saturday and set to air Monday on a Quebec radio station.

Palin campaign spokeswoman Tracey Schmitt confirmed she had received the prank call.

"Governor Palin was mildly amused to learn that she had joined the ranks of heads of state, including President Sarkozy and other celebrities, in being targeted by these pranksters. C'est la vie," she said.

The call was made by a well-known Montreal comedy duo Marc-Antoine Audette and Sebastien Trudel. Known as the Masked Avengers, the two are notorious for prank calls to celebrities and heads of state.

Audette, posing as Sarkozy, speaks in an exaggerated French accent and drops ample hints that the conversation is a joke. But Palin seemingly does not pick up on them.

Cautious joy as blacks imagine Obama win

AP, Washington

Lula Cooper expects the tears to flow if Barack Obama becomes the first black president. But she's not breaking out the tissues just yet.

"I cried when I marked my ballot for him. We've had such an incredible journey to this point," said the former civil rights activist, her voice quivering. "I think he's going to win, but I really am very, very cautious."

Like a Hollywood blockbuster whose conclusion feels assured but still sets the heart racing, the endgame of this election has gripped black America with a powerful mixture of emotions.

Obama's potential victory represents a previously unimaginable triumph over centuries of racism. But beneath the hope and pride lies fear: of polling inaccu-

racy, voting chicanery, or the type of injustice and violence that have historically stymied African-American progress.

Cooper, 75, experienced the oppression of the 1950s and '60s as she was dragged off to jail for protesting segregation in Wilmington, Del., where her husband was DuPont's first black chemist. Now living in the Southwest, she said she experienced modern politics when her husband lost a recent bid to become their city's first black mayor after the election was switched to mail-in ballots rather than polling-place voting.

So when it comes to Obama, Cooper is "optimistic and hopeful but experience plays a big part."

"With my generation, in the '60s every leader that we had was killed," she said. "Then it's almost like a plate over your heart. Once

you've been hurt King, Kennedy, Medgar Evers you dare not put that much emotion out there again."

With even some Republicans using the word "miracle" to characterize the prospect of a victory by GOP candidate John McCain, given his lagging poll numbers, the shock of an Obama loss would be almost incalculable for many blacks. So people are protecting themselves.

"I can't tell you how much fear, but at the same time joy and expectation I have," said James Lowry, a management consultant from Chicago. "It revolves around every five minutes. I have hope, I read the polls, I get excited, then I say, 'Anything can happen.'"

Michael Cornwell, a surgeon from Atlanta, checks poll numbers daily online and fully expects Obama to win. Still, "you can't shake the tension," he said.

Democrats look for White House, Congress clean sweep

AP, Washington

Democrats are hoping to take a stranglehold on political power in Washington in Tuesday's election and are all but assured of expanding their majorities in the Senate and House of Representatives.

Demoralized Republicans who fear seeing the White House fall to Democrat Barack Obama are bracing for more pain with the deepening economic crisis set to scythe through their ranks in Congress.

Still reeling from 2006 mid-term polls, which saw Democrats wrench away their control of the Senate and the House of Representatives, Republicans look set to take further losses in a toxic political climate.

Reverberations from the economic crisis look set to help

Democrats widen majorities in both chambers and the party is envisioning years of dominance in Congress.

Just two days from election day, November 4, Democratic congressional candidates are basking in Obama's momentum while Republicans fail to shake off the unpopular legacy of President George W. Bush.

Democrats are banking on big gains in the Senate, where even conservative estimates show six or seven seats in the 100 strong-chamber are likely to change hands, with several more likely to topple on a really bad night for Republicans.

Current polls suggest that Democrats can expect to add at least 25 seats to their current majority of 36 when all 435 House perches come up for reelection.

Though Democrats have been on top for two years and Congress is held in contempt -- its approval ratings hit a historic low of 15 percent in a recent CBS poll -- Republicans, as holders of the White House, are carrying the can for the crisis.

The 2008 congressional battlefield was always tilted towards Democrats. By a quirk of the political schedule, 23 Republican seats are up for reelection in the Senate compared to just 12 held by Democrats.

Fearing a Democratic tide, some Republicans in the 100-seat chamber retired. Only one Democratic seat, that of Senator Mary Landrieu in Louisiana, is seen as competitive for Republicans and she looks safe.

Democrats currently enjoy a 51-49 edge in the Senate, with the help of two independents.

It would take a political earthquake for them to hit the magic 60 seats barrier needed to pass major legislation and the power to break Republican filibuster delaying tactics.

Democrats seem a lock to grab seats held by retiring Republicans in Virginia and New Mexico. In Minnesota, comedian Al Franken was up on current Republican Senator Norm Coleman by four points in the latest Rasmussen poll in the state.

New Hampshire political icon Jeanne Shaheen was up eight points in the most recent polling as she attempts to avenge her 2002 defeat at the hands of incumbent John Sununu.

She was set to get a campaign boost next week from Hillary Clinton.

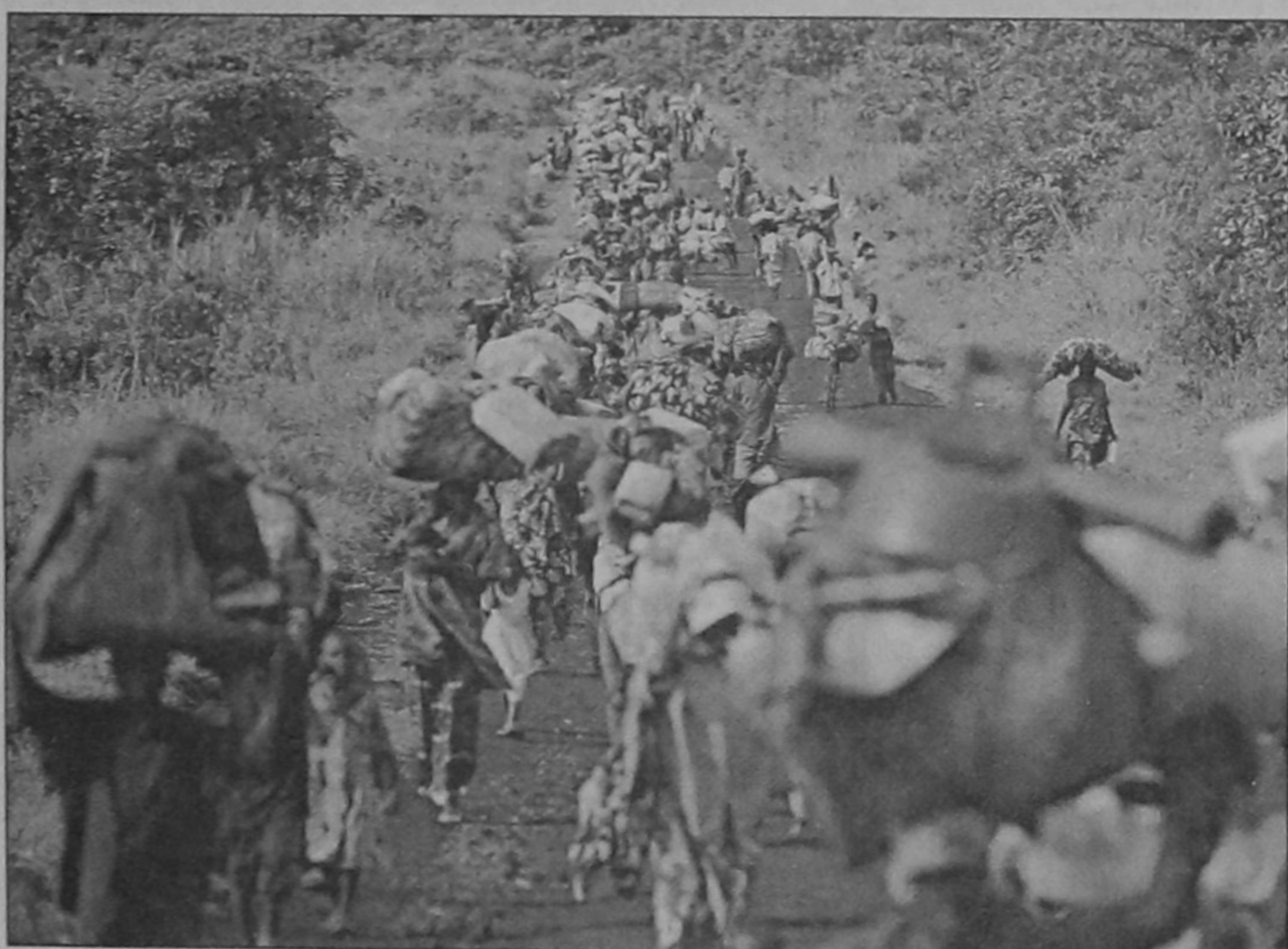


PHOTO: AFP

Internally Displaced People (IDPs) leave Kibati heading north from the city to their villages, Kibumba and Rugari, north of the provincial capital of Goma, Congo yesterday. Several thousand people displaced in the fighting between rebels and government troops in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo began returning home Sunday as a ceasefire holds.

West warns of humanitarian crisis in DR Congo

AFP, Kibumba, DR Congo

Thousands of displaced sought to return home Sunday in eastern DR Congo as a ceasefire held, but European diplomats warned 1.6 million were at risk despite a rebel charm offensive that included a parade.

As the rebels who have taken control of sections of the country's east sought to reassure residents that they would be safe, Western diplomats worked to avert disaster.

A flood of residents, many of whom fled just seven days ago, trudged along one of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo's main roads on foot, carrying bundles of personal belongings.

"We received no food, so we are returning," said Paul Bashobye Bareke, 51, surrounded by his wife and their eight children.

Diplomats pleaded for cooperation to address humanitarian needs.

More than 1.6 million internally displaced are trapped in the

crisis and cannot be easily" accessed, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband said in Dar Es Salaam. "They are without food, water and other necessities."

He spoke after he and his French counterpart Bernard Kouchner held talks with Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete, current chairman of the African Union.

They had earlier met Democratic Republic of Congo President Joseph Kabila and the president of neighbouring Rwanda, Paul Kagame.

But the two countries were cool when it came to any suggestion they should send troops to the DRC to bolster the UN peacekeeping force there, and France said it had been consulting Angola as to whether it could contribute.

Kinshasa has accused Rwanda's Tutsi-dominated regime of supporting the rebels, which Kigali has repeatedly denied. The rebels are led by renegade ex-general Laurent Nkunda, who claims to be protecting the local Tutsi population.

Analysts say there is little doubt that Kigali, frustrated by Kinshasa's failure to disarm a Rwandan Hutu rebel group harbouring key perpetrators of the 1994 genocide against Tutsis, assists Nkunda.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, speaking during a trip to the Gulf, told reporters Saturday the international community must "not allow Congo to become another Rwanda," where 800,000 people died in the 1994 genocide.

Kikwete on Sunday said he was involved in intensive diplomatic efforts ahead of a summit on the situation in Nairobi next week, where the leaders of Rwanda and the DR Congo were expected to discuss means of ending the fighting.

The United States' top diplomat for Africa, Jendayi Frazer, has also held talks with Kabila and Kagame.

The DR Congo government prefers a "political solution" to the conflict, a spokesman said, but warned all options would be kept open.

Iraq expects answer on security deal after US polls

AP, Baghdad

Iraq expects Washington's reply on proposed changes to a draft security agreement after the US elections, an aide to the prime minister said Sunday.

Yassin Majeed said the US will respond to Iraq's amendments to the pact after Tuesday's elections so the new president-elect can be informed of the status of the talks.

Since May, US and Iraqi officials have been trying to hammer out a new security agreement by the end of the year that would keep US troops in the country until 2011.

The current draft calls for all US forces to leave by Dec. 31, 2011 unless Iraq asks them to stay. It also gives Iraqi courts limited jurisdiction over US troops accused of major crimes committed off post and off duty.

But the pact faces opposition from Iraqi lawmakers, and Prime

Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Cabinet is pressing for changes in the draft text before submitting it to parliament for approval.

Al-Maliki wants more jurisdiction over US troops and guarantees that Iraqi territory will not be used by the US to launch attacks on neighbouring countries. Baghdad also wants to remove language that could allow the US to stay beyond the end of 2011. Without a new agreement, the US would have to suspend all security and assistance operations in the country by the end of the year when the current pact expires.

Iraqi authorities are feeling more confident since a sharp drop in violence in the country after the Sunni revolt against al-Qaeda and the routing of Shia militias in Baghdad and southern Iraq last spring.

Still, attacks continue, although at a lower level, and US officials warn the gains are reversible.

PROFILE Obama set for a date with destiny

AFP, Washington

After a gruelling, hard-fought rollercoaster 21 months, Barack Obama stands on the brink of realizing his improbable quest and making history by becoming the first black US president.

On February 10, 2007, the little unknown Illinois senator stood on the steps of the state's capitol building on a freezing winter's day and urged thousands of supporters to join him in his audacious tilt at the White House.

"If you will join me in this improbable quest, if you feel destiny calling, and see as I see, a future of endless possibility stretching before us ... if you sense, as I sense, that the time is now to shake off our slumber, and slough off our fear ... then I'm ready to take up the cause," Obama said.

Now with the polls predicting he will win the presidency and roundly defeat Republican rival John McCain on Tuesday, Obama seems set for a date with destiny.

Four short years ago, when George W. Bush and John Kerry were battling for the keys to the White House, Obama was just a



little known Chicago politician who gave a dazzling speech at the 2004 Democratic convention.

But he has ignited a new fervour and excitement in a country frustrated by the same old faces on the political scene, panicked by an economic crisis which has dragged down the world's top economy and sickened by the Iraq war.

In defying the odds, the 47-year-old African-American senator has reshaped conventional wisdom on how to pay for a successful White House bid by harnessing the Internet as a powerful fund-raising tool.

In September, Obama's campaign smashed its already stag-

gering record with a mammoth haul of more than 150 million dollars in one month as they barrelled towards the November 4 vote.

Aides said Obama now has more than 3.1 million donors. The result has allowed the young senator to take on the weight of the well-established, wealthy Republican machine, as well as see off his Democratic primary rival former first lady Hillary Clinton.

For the first time in decades, true Republican red states such as Virginia and North Carolina are now being touted as battlegrounds, which could turn to Democratic blue.

Obama has been openly compared to another young senator John F. Kennedy, who in the early 1960s re-energized his nation. And in the rollercoaster primary race, Obama was symbolically passed the dynasty's political mantle by liberal lion Senator Edward Kennedy.

In his meteoric rise, Obama appears to be realising long-held dreams that the United States may be slowly turning a page on centuries of bitter racial divisions.

Russia, Libya sign civil nuclear deal

AFP, Moscow

Libya and Russia signed a civil nuclear cooperation deal Saturday, Tripoli's foreign minister said, as Muammar Gaddafi visited Moscow for talks he said could help restore "geopolitical equilibrium".

The Libyan leader's first visit to Moscow since 1985, the Cold War era, and which included meetings with President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, was also expected to focus on oil and gas and arms purchases.

While Russian officials did not confirm the nuclear accord, Libyan Foreign Minister Abdelrahman Chalgham described it as touching on a range of issues.

"A cooperation agreement was signed in the area of the peaceful use of civilian nuclear, particularly in the design and construction of reactors and the supply of nuclear fuel," said Abdelrahman Chalgham, who accompanied Gaddafi.

The deal also extended to nuclear use in medicine and nuclear waste treatment, he said. The Kremlin made no comment, and Russian government

spokesman Dmitry Peskov said no such agreement had been signed during the meeting between Gaddafi and Putin.

According to sources in the Libyan delegation, the deal was signed by the head of Russia's atomic energy agency, Rosatom, and Libya's head of nuclear energy management.

Chalgham said the two countries also signed agreements related to calls for the creation of an Opec-style body for gas-producing countries, among others.

Gaddafi had earlier spoken of cooperating on energy.

"Cooperation in the gas and oil sphere is extremely important now," the leader of energy-rich Libya told Medvedev, speaking through a Russian translator.

At his meeting with Putin, Gaddafi said "the development of our bilateral relations is a positive factor for the international situation ... It contributes to the re-establishment of geopolitical equilibrium."



PHOTO: AFP

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (L) visits the Bedouin tent encampment of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi (R) on the grounds of the Kremlin in Moscow on Saturday. Gaddafi and Putin relaxed after talks that stressed oil and gas in Gaddafi's first visit to Russia since 1985.