

Obama promises action on economy



President-elect Barack Obama holds his first post-election press conference at the Hilton Hotel flanked by his vice president-elect Joe Biden (L), his new chief of staff Rahm Emanuel (R), and members of his Transition Economic Advisory Board on Friday in Chicago, Illinois. The Press conference followed a meeting with his Transition Economic Advisory Board.

AP, Chicago

Inheriting an economy in peril, President-elect Obama warned on Friday that the nation faces the challenge of a lifetime and pledged he would act urgently to help Americans devastated by lost jobs, disappearing savings and homes seized in foreclosure. But the man who promised change cautioned against hoping for quick solutions.

"It is not going to be easy for us to dig ourselves out of the hole that we are in," Obama said at his first news conference since winning the presidency on Tuesday.

The No. 1 priority, Obama said, is to get Congress to approve an economic stimulus plan that would extend jobless benefits, send food aid to the poor, dispatch Medicaid funds to states and spend tens of billions of dollars on public works projects. If the plan is not approved this month, in a special session of Congress, Obama said that "it will be the first thing I get done as president of the United States."

In his first appearance since a jubilant election-night celebra-

tion, Obama sought to project an air of calm and reassurance to a deeply worried nation. He stood in a presidential-like setting with an array of eight American flags and a lectern showing a presidential seal above the words "The Office of the President Elect." The stage behind him was lined with advisers he had summoned, his economic brain trust.

Almost 20 minutes late to his first meeting with reporters, Obama spoke for just 20 minutes and broke no ground with new policy announcements or disclosures of who would be in his Cabinet. In lighthearted moments, he joked about seances with dead presidents and the appeal of animal shelter dogs that are "mutts like me."

Constrained by the fact he will not take office until Jan. 20, Obama deferred to President Bush and his economic team on major decisions. "The United States has only one government and one president at a time," he said.

Declaring he would not respond to issues "in a knee-jerk fashion," Obama declined to say how he

would deal with Iran, whose president sent a letter of congratulations to Obama. "I want to be very careful that we are sending the right signals to the world as a whole that I am not the president and I won't be until January 20th," he said.

A new jobless report offered no comfort. The unemployment rate climbed to a 14-year high in October and 10.1 million people were out of work. In Detroit, General Motors reported a huge third-quarter loss and said it may run out of cash next year. Ford planned more job cuts after burning through billions of dollars of its own.

While standing back as long as Bush is president, Obama said his advisers would keep close watch on the administration's efforts to unlock frozen credit and stabilize financial markets. Obama said he wanted to make sure the Bush administration was "protecting taxpayers, helping homeowners and not unduly rewarding the management of financial firms that are receiving government assistance."

killing civilians. New York-based Human Rights Watch said at least 100 have died, while others say the civilian toll is undetermined.

Meanwhile, Congolese soldiers advanced toward rebel lines yesterday in renewed fighting that threatens a tenuous cease-fire around the eastern provincial capital Goma.

Renewed fighting erupted Friday, and by Saturday morning the army had moved more than half a mile (at least one kilometre) north of Kibati into the no man's land the belligerents have left unpatrolled since the rebels called a cease-fire 10 days ago after routing the army. Kibati is about 10km north of Goma.

Fighting raged anew in Congo between the army and rebels outside Goma near Kibati, where about 45,000 refugees from the rebellion in mineral-rich eastern Congo have taken refuge. Thousands fled toward the relative safety of Goma.

African leaders slam Congo peacekeepers

Congolese soldiers move to take on rebels

AP, Nairobi

African leaders criticised the world's largest United Nations peacekeeping force Friday for failing to protect civilians and end the violence that is convulsing eastern Congo and threatening to spread.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon acknowledged the 17,000 troops were "stretched to the limit." He spoke in Nairobi at a summit with African leaders that included Congolese President Joseph Kabila and Rwandan President Paul Kagame. Officials said rebel leader Laurent Nkunda, who's spearheading the Congo offensive, was not invited.

The summit communiqué said regional nations should send peacemaking forces if necessary and "not stand by to witness incessant and destructive acts of violence by armed groups against innocent people."

Both sides have been accused of

Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons 'unacceptable'

Says Obama

AFP, Chicago/ Tehran

US President-elect Barack Obama said Friday that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons was "unacceptable" and the Islamic Republic must stop supporting "terrorist organisations."

Obama, speaking at his first press conference since winning Tuesday's presidential election, also confirmed that he had been sent a letter from Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad following his victory.

"I am aware that the letter was sent," Obama said in response to the only question of the press conference about foreign policy. "I will be reviewing the letter from President Ahmadinejad and, we will respond appropriately."

"It has only been three days since the election, and obviously, how we

approach and deal with a country like Iran is not something that we should, you know, simply do in a knee-jerk fashion," Obama said. "We have to think it through."

The president-elect called for an "international effort" to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon.

"Let me repeat and state what I stated in the course of the campaign," he said. "Iran's development of a nuclear weapon I believe is unacceptable. We have to mount an international effort to prevent that from happening."

Obama added that "Iran's support of terrorist organisations, I think, is something that has to cease."

The president-elect also stressed during the 20-minute press conference that he has not yet taken office and won't until January 20, 2009.

"I have to reiterate once again, we

only have one president at a time," he said. "I want to be very careful that we are sending the right signals to the world as a whole."

Meanwhile, Iran's parliament speaker Ali Larijani yesterday slammed US president-elect Barack Obama for saying its pursuit of nuclear weapons was "unacceptable," the official IRNA news agency reported.

"This signifies a pursuit of the same erroneous policy as in the past," Larijani said when asked about Obama's comment on Friday.

"If the United States wants to change its standing in the region it should send good signals," he said.

"Obama understands that change does not only mean a change of colour and superficial differences, change must also have a strategic basis," the agency quoted Larijani as saying.

NZ's opposition party wins polls

AFP, Wellington

John Key's centre-right National Party swept to power on a theme of change in New Zealand's elections yesterday, ending the nine-year reign of Helen Clark's Labour Party.

Key's promise to foster the "politics of aspiration" struck a chord with New Zealand's three million voters, who gave the rich former investment banker a mandate to form a conservative alliance with the small ACT and United Future parties.

Since the complex mixed member proportional (MMP) electoral system was introduced in 1996, no single party has been able to control the parliament without the help of minor parties.

Key added a sober note to a night of celebration when he said the country of 4.3 million people -- which slipped into recession in the first half of the year -- would have to confront the economic fallout from the global financial crisis.

"We must make the most of our advantages because the state of the global economy and the global financial crisis means that the road ahead may well be a rocky one," he said.

2002 after amassing a fortune estimated at 50 million dollars (29 million US).

The centre-right National Party won 45.5 percent of the vote or 59 seats in a 122 seat Parliament. Key will have a majority with allies, the right-wing ACT Party with five seats and one more from United Future's Peter Dunne.

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New Zealand's new Prime Minister-elect John Key (R) waves to the crowd with wife Bronagh (2nd L) and children Max (L) and Stephie (2nd R) after defeating the ruling Labour Party government of Helen Clark yesterday. Key, a multi-millionaire former investment banker, will lead a National Party-led government after a big swing against Labour.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Obama faces early test in Iraq

AP, Baghdad

Iraq will serve as an early test of Barack Obama's skill in weighing options and measuring risks. The next few months should give an indication whether he can end the Iraq war without risking new violence that could threaten US interests throughout the Middle East.

Ending the war, which the Congressional Budget Office says costs \$145 billion a year, would fulfil an important campaign promise and free up military resources for the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

But can Iraq stand on its own without the US presence?

After so many sacrifices, can the US afford to watch a country of 27 million people, strategically located next to Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia and with one of the world's major sources of oil, collapse into chaos?

The first signs of where Iraq is headed should come soon after the president-elect takes office Jan. 20, when Iraqis choose ruling councils in most of the country's 18 provinces.

At the same time, the Iraqis will be assuming more control of Baghdad and integrating former Sunni insurgents into the security forces or civilian government jobs.

If those steps go smoothly, Iraqis will have a real chance of maintaining the security gains since the US troop buildup of last year.

If they don't, the new president would have to decide whether to slow the US departure despite his promise to remove American combat troops within his first 16 months in office.

Provincial elections have been widely seen as a major step in forging power-sharing agreements among Iraq's religious and ethnic communities that the US believes are key to lasting peace.

Iraqis still need US: Dy PM

5 Iraqis killed in suicide attack

AP, AFP, Baghdad/Ramadi

having been approved. Saleh, who is Kurdish, says the pact is essential to preserve "the security improvement which has been achieved." He spoke to reporters Saturday.

Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh warns that Iraq will enter a "period of a legal vacuum" if the UN mandate under which US troops operate in Iraq expires by June 30 and withdraw them from the country by 2012.

Earlier five civilians were killed on Saturday when a suicide

bomber blew himself up at a police checkpoint near the western Iraqi town of Ramadi, police said.

Three police officers were wounded in the midday attack, Ramadi police chief Major General Tariq al-Duleimi told AFP.

Another four policemen and two civilians were wounded by a bomb that exploded near a patrol passing through eastern Ramadi, according to Khalaf al-Salim, a local police officer.



Haitians help victims of the College Promesse Evangelique school that collapsed on Friday in Petion-ville, Haiti. At least 82 people were killed when the school in the Port-au-Prince suburb with 700 pupils collapsed Friday, a police spokesman said.

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Senior al-Qaeda member killed in Iraq: US

AFP, Baghdad

US and Iraqi forces killed a senior al-Qaeda leader allegedly responsible for organising car bombs and suicide attacks in a fire fight outside Baghdad, the US military said on Saturday.

The operative, known as Abu Ghazwan al-Hayali, was killed on Thursday night during an operation by US troops and the Sons of Iraq, a Sunni militia allied with the US military, in the town of Tarmiyah north of the capital.

Hayali had been responsible for "building and facilitating vehicle-borne explosive devices (car and truck bombs) in the Baghdad area," the military said in a statement.

Additionally, he was responsible for other terrorist groups, which recruit and train children and females to conduct suicide attacks" against Iraqi and US-led forces.

The military added that two members of the Sons of Iraq were wounded by an explosion during the exchange of fire in which Hayali was killed.

In the past year US and Iraqi forces have killed dozens of local leaders of al-Qaeda in Iraq -- a franchise inspired by Osama Bin Laden's global network -- contributing to a sharp drop in violence in the war-torn country.

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