

# Obama begins life as US president

AFP, Washington

In his first official act since taking the oath of office, US President Barack Obama issued a proclamation decreeing his inauguration day to be a "National Day of Renewal and Reconciliation" and calling for a national commitment to public service.

The first black US president walked into the White House hours after being sworn in at the US Capitol and walking part of the way to the presidential mansion, borne by adoring cheers from thousands of well-wishers.

Obama, the 44th US president, was expected to take his first steps in the Oval Office, the heart of power in the White House, but not take any major actions on his first day, according to press secretary Robert Gibbs.

"We anticipate that he will, after he watches some of the parade, probably go in there for a few minutes," Gibbs said during his first informal question-and-answer session with reporters in the White House.



US President Barack Obama signs one of the first acts Tuesday night, hours after taking the oath of office.

Former president George W Bush said at his final press conference last week that, "the minute he walks in the Oval Office" Obama will feel "the responsibilities of the president land squarely on his shoulders."

Gibbs signalled that the moving-in process was making progress, with some offi-

cially able to get settled even as painters still worked in the West Wing, but said he was having some computer trouble.

"Now we just have to figure out how to log on our computers," he said, before joking about the small number of "W" keys that went missing in a January 2001 prank when

Bush took office.

"All the keys are intact, I just don't know the code to get in," said Gibbs, who praised outgoing officials including his predecessor Dana Perino's cooperation in ensuring a smooth handover of power.

"All of our staff now would agree that their counterparts were very helpful," said the

spokesman, who had yet to read the note traditionally left by departing press secretaries in a symbolic flak jacket for their successors.

"Dana showed me where it was and told me to read it early, but I have not had a chance to read it yet," he said, joking "that's why I'm out here."

Gibbs said he had received his first email on his brand new official government BlackBerry handheld device at 12:07 pm (1707 GMT), the transcript of Obama's inaugural address, from a White House stenographer.

"The next email said 'you're the only one I sent this to because you're the only email address I had,'" he laughed.

Gibbs ducked a question about whether Obama possessed a working BlackBerry, saying: "That's a good question, I just don't know the answer. There were a lot of things I was thinking about making sure that he had this morning. The BlackBerry wasn't the first thing."

## Mandela welcomes Obama's 'voice of hope'

AFP, Johannesburg

South Africa's former president Nelson Mandela hailed the arrival of US President Barack Obama as "new voice of hope" in a letter to the new leader.

Mandela, who himself achieved iconic status for his role in South Africa's anti-apartheid movement and the peaceful transition to democratic rule there, added his voice to the congratulations flooding in from around the world.

"We believe that we are witnessing something truly historic not only in the political annals of your great nation, the United States of America, but of the world," the Nobel Peace Prize winner wrote.

"Your election to this high office has inspired people as few other events in recent times have done."

Mandela, who served as his country's first black president between 1994 and 1999, compared Obama's arrival as US president with the excitement felt in South Africa after the transition from apartheid rule to democracy.

"You, Mister President, have brought a new voice of hope that these problems can be addressed and that we can in fact change the world and make of it a better place."

"There is a special excitement on our continent today, Mister President, in the knowledge that you have such strong personal ties with Africa."

## Israeli army probes use of phosphorus in Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's army has launched an inquiry into whether paratroopers used banned white phosphorus shells close to civilians during the Gaza offensive, a newspaper said yesterday.

Haaretz said the probe centred on the firing of some 20 shells -- which are banned for use in populated areas -- around Beit Lahya in the northern Gaza Strip by a reserve parachute brigade.

Reserve colonel Shai Alkalai was put in charge of the investigations, the paper said, but an army spokesman told AFP it was not an official inquiry.

Haaretz said the army used two types of phosphorus shells and considered them as smokebombs.

Under international law, white phosphorus is banned for use near civilians, but is permitted for creating a smokescreen.

Donatella Rovera, Amnesty's researcher on Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories said, "Its repeated use in this manner, despite evidence of its indiscriminate effects and its toll on civilians, is a war crime."

The group said that one of the places worst affected by the use of white phosphorus was the main UN compound in Gaza City, where Israeli forces fired three white phosphorus shells on 15 January.

## S Korea probes clash that left 6 dead

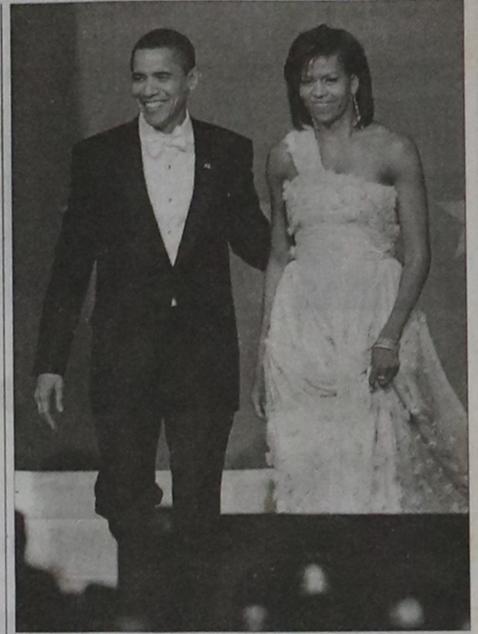
AP, Seoul

Authorities stepped up the investigation yesterday into a clash that left six people dead and 23 injured when police confronted displaced tenants who were occupying a vacant office building as a protest in Seoul.

Forensic experts were combing the five-story building in the Yongsan neighborhood of the South Korean capital as human rights officials investigated whether police used excessive force Tuesday in sending 14 squadrons of riot police and a team of commandos to break up the siege.

Some 40 tenants and small business owners had been camped out at the building since Monday to push for better compensation in return for being evicted from area buildings as part of redevelopment plans, a tenants' rights association said.

Backed by 1,400 riot police on the ground, 100 commandos landed on the roof in a shipping container to break up their makeshift rooftop camp.



US President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama arrive at the Mid-Atlantic Inaugural Ball Tuesday night in Washington, DC. President Obama hosted ten Inaugural Balls.

## Obama vows to wield power with 'humility, restraint'

AFP, Washington

New President Barack Obama sought to distance himself from the turbulent Bush era as he prepared to hit the ground running yesterday and act on a promise to wield American power with "humility and restraint."

Fresh from his buoyant inauguration, Obama will begin to flesh out his vision of better ties with Muslim countries and of new alliance-building to promote peace and security, including by eliminating perceived nuclear threats.

Though his inaugural speech Tuesday largely sounded conciliatory, he also struck tougher notes when he warned that the United States will not waver in defense of its "way of life" and would defeat those who use "terror."

The person he intends to carry out his foreign policy is Hillary Clinton who is due to see a US Senate vote Wednesday on her nomination for secretary of state, according to a Democratic leadership source. She is widely expected to be confirmed.

The Obama administration faces daunting challenges to extract US troops from Iraq, forge peace in both the Middle East and Afghanistan, stabilize nuclear-armed US ally Pakistan, and roll back Iran's and North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

Security in post 9/11 America, he pledged, will not come at the expense of abandoning the US ideals of liberty and the rule of law, which critics worldwide say George W. Bush's administration trampled on in conducting its war on terror.

In a job at the unilateral military force that Bush used to invade Iraq in 2003, Obama said previous American generations had defeated fascism and communism with "sturdy alliances and enduring convictions" besides resorting to armed intervention.

These generations knew

that US "security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint," Obama said, alluding to the accusations of arrogance cast at the Bush administration.

His administration will be guided by such principles as it meet "those new threats that demand... even greater cooperation and understanding between nations," Obama declared.

"We will begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people, and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan," he said.

Obama has vowed to mend alliances with Europe, whose additional support he seeks to help bring peace to Afghanistan where the Taliban has re-emerged as a threat following its ouster by US forces in 2001.

"With old friends and former foes, we will work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat," he added.

He was referring to a "new approach" both he and Clinton have promised toward reining in Iran's nuclear ambitions by engaging diplomatically with the Shiite Muslim country.

In her Senate confirmation hearing last week, Clinton talked of "engaging directly with Syria" in a bid to change its hardline behavior.

On North Korea, there was little sign of a new approach as Clinton said last week that the Obama team would favor the nuclear disarmament negotiations pursued by the Bush administration in its later years with the two Koreas, China, Japan and Russia.

In 2002, Bush lumped North Korea in an "axis of evil" with Iraq and Iran, but he took a more multilateral diplomatic approach to Tehran and Pyongyang after US forces became bogged down in two wars.

## US press hails new president

AFP, Washington

The front pages of US newspapers trumpeted "President Obama" late Tuesday after a historic day which saw the swearing-in of the country's first black president.

"President Obama Pledges a Remade America," wrote the New York Times, hailing the "moment of historical significance."

Like most major US media, the Times included a special commemorative pullout section as a souvenir of January 20, 2009, the day when history was made.

The first page carried a picture of President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama, walking along Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House, just after he took the oath of office.

The Los Angeles Times chose instead a photograph of the new first couple side by side with Vice President Joe Biden and his wife, Jill, on the Capitol steps bidding farewell to former president George W. Bush as he headed home to Texas.

"Power Walk" was the headline of the tabloid New York Post, accompanied by a photo of the stroll along the famous avenue to its most coveted residence, as the golden outfit worn by the first lady shimmered in the evening sun.

The Chicago Tribune from Obama's hometown highlighted the "new era of responsibility, suggesting that what has come before him was irresponsibility."

## Iran warns BBC Tehran staff not to help Farsi service

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday warned the BBC Tehran bureau against contributing to the network's newly-launched Farsi-language television channel, which is banned from operating in Iran, Fars news agency reported.

"BBC English channel will be confronted if it abuses its legal rights by producing reports for BBC Persian and we are continually on watch for that," Culture Minister Mohammad Hossein Saffar Harandi said.

"This Persian channel is not planned with good intentions and they reflect the same issues differently in Persian and English services," said Harandi, whose ministry is in charge of licensing and monitoring foreign media.

He reiterated that the Farsi-language BBC channel is banned from "presence and making field reports in Iran" and warned local journalists against cooperating with it.

"BBC and Britain have a clear record of inciting unrest and provoking different groups against each other in countries," he said, according to the ILNA news agency.

BBC Persian TV began broadcasting on January 14, aimed at around 100 million Farsi speakers in the region -- 70 million in Iran, 20 million in Afghanistan and 10 million in Tajikistan and central Asia.

## World greets new US leader with jubilation and caution

AFP, Paris

The world hailed the dawning of the Barack Obama era at the White House but the leaders that the new US president will have to deal with also warned him of the difficulties ahead.

Millions followed Obama's inauguration worldwide, with parties held from London to Sydney. Thousands danced in the Kenyan village where his father was born, while his former classmates celebrated at his former school in Indonesia.

Underscoring the huge show of global faith in Obama's leadership, French President Nicolas Sarkozy said: "We are eager for him to get to work so that with his leadership we can change the world."

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown hailed Obama as a "man of great vision" and his arrival as a "new chapter in both American history and the world's history."

"He's not only the first black American president but he sets out with the determination to solve the world's problems," said Brown.

Japan's Prime Minister Taro Aso also vowed to work with Obama to boost "peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region and the world."

In Indonesia where

Obama attended school in the late 1960s, his former classmates brimmed with pride after the chubby kid they knew as "Barry" became the most powerful man in the world.

"It will be easy for him to bridge all the differences between West and East. He will bring peace to the world," said lawmaker Dewi Asmara Oetoyo, a former classmate.

Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said Obama's message of hope resonated around the globe.

Some leaders sought to temper the high expectations.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel wished Obama "the best of luck" but gave the latest in a series of warnings to the new US president.

She said Obama would not sway Germany to add further to its committed 4,500 troops in Afghanistan.

But he added: "I think we should not expect him to immediately solve all America's problems, nor ours. Barack Obama does not have a magic wand."

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said he hoped their two countries would be "full partners in promoting peace and stability in the Middle

East."

Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said his country would await the "practical policies" of the new US president before passing judgement on him.

Pope Benedict XVI sent a message to Obama calling on him "to promote understanding, cooperation and peace" among nations.

China offered a nervous welcome to the new president, expressing concern over the

direction he may take in Sino-US ties after the improvements seen under his predecessor in their once volatile relationship.

"Given the popular American eagerness for a break from the Bush years, many wonder, or worry to be precise, whether the new president would ignore the hard-earned progress in bilateral ties," the state-run China Daily said in an editorial.



A Lebanese man reads the headlines of newspapers at a newsstand in Beirut yesterday. The world hailed the dawning of the Barack Obama era but also warned him of the difficulties ahead.

### NEWS ANALYSIS

## How Obama will make history



Barack Hussein Obama

KEVIN CONNOLLY, BBC Online

With every step he took along the journey that has now led him at last to the White House, you sensed that history was shadowing Barack Obama, never more than a half a pace behind him.

From the moment at the Democratic Convention in Boston in 2004 when he first displayed his extraordinary ability to conjure a mood and capture an audience, it began to seem possible that he would prove himself the first black man with a realistic chance of winning the White House.

From that moment on, he was written about and judged in a way that set him apart from the other candidates who crowded America's political stage in the early months of Campaign 2008.

Because of the colour of his skin, Obama was not merely another primary candidate - he was a character in the long and painful story of America's evolution away from a past of racial division and violence.

Not since Robert Kennedy's doomed run for office in 1968, perhaps, had a candidate with a realistic chance of victory entered a presidential race carrying such a burden from the past - although Kennedy's burden was, of course, very different.

Obama seemed to sense it too - his speeches were littered with allusions to history, because he understood that you cannot shape the future unless you understand the past.

Obama swore the oath of office on former President Lincoln's Bible.

We hear a lot about Obama's fascination with America's 16th President Abraham Lincoln.

Is there in that fascination perhaps a message? Lincoln may have been on the side of the angels, but he was a tough pragmatist rather than a dreamer and he was prepared to do whatever it took to save the Union, win the war and free the slaves.

Will Obama turn out to be a similar kind of figure - tough in pursuit of a few key policy goals and ready to do whatever it takes to deliver them?

The problem is that there's no guarantee that having a sense of history guarantees that you will be judged kindly by it.

George W Bush is said to be an avid reader of historical works too - and to share Obama's fascination with Lincoln - and yet he is leaving office with a curious atmosphere of melancholy clinging to him because his period in office cannot possibly have turned out as he hoped.

Obama is unusual because he will be written about by future historians in two different ways.

First, there will be the question of how he uses his power to shape history.

Many will look to see how prospects for African-Americans change.

His inaugural address while it perhaps lacked one single line that will resonate down the ages, was a masterpiece in the sense that it sought to lift America's hearts in the moment, whilst also lifting its eyes to the scale of the challenge ahead.

The challenges won't be met quickly, or easily, but "America, they will be met." There you have the yardstick against which Obama invites judgement - realistic in his assessment of the difficulties ahead and yet prepared to dream when he imagines America's future.

The second way in which he will be judged, of course, is for the manner in which he fulfils that role as a character in the story of America's painful evolution into a society where hope and opportunity are shared equally between black and white.

There are any number of statistics which illustrate how unequal things are now, more than 40 years after Martin Luther King spoke of a dream.

Obama enjoys overwhelming and deeply emotional support from nearly all African-Americans, who see his triumph as a triumph for all of them.

The inaugural ceremony took place at a building built by slave labour.

Nothing will dim their support for him - love is not too strong a word - but historians of the African-American experience will judge his time in office by how the lot of black Americans changes on his watch.

It is a tall order, but he has plenty of change to build on. As he said himself, he is taking office in a city where his father wouldn't have been allowed to book a restaurant table, and that is extraordinary enough.

And he swore his oath at a Capitol building which was the work of black slave labour - those nameless figures from the biggest past must have watched the day with silent acclamation too.



Kenyan mothers, Linda Omondi with baby Michelle Obama (L) and Caroline Akinyi with baby Barack Obama carry their newly borns named after US President Barack Obama and first Lady Michelle, on Tuesday at the new Nyanza general hospital in Kisumu, where they were born moments after the inauguration of the first black US president. Kisumu city is a western lakeside town about an hour drive from the village where Obama's father was born.