

Two states 'only resolution' to ME conflict: Obama

AFP, Cairo

President Barack Obama reiterated yesterday US support for a Palestinian state living in peace with Israel, calling on Palestinians to renounce violence and on Israel to put an end to settlements.

His remarks, in a speech at Cairo University, drew praise from moderate Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and a sceptical response from the Islamist movement Hamas, a sworn enemy of the Jewish state.

Obama, for whom Middle East peace is a key element of foreign policy, vowed that the United States would not turn its back on the "legitimate" Palestinian aspiration for a state, saying two states are the "only resolution."

And the US leader, on his first major visit to the Middle East, vowed that he would "personally pursue this outcome."

Speaking of their suffering over the past 60 years, Obama said "let there be no doubt: the situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable."

"America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity and a state of their own," he said, calling for Palestinians to abandon violence.

Abbas spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina hailed what he called a "an innovative political step and a good beginning on which one must build."

Obama, who has taken a much tougher stance with Israel than his predecessor George W. Bush, also pointed to the suffering of the Jews over the centuries and said denial of the Holocaust was "baseless, ignorant and hateful."

"Threatening Israel with destruction -- or repeating vile stereotypes about Jews -- is deeply wrong, and only serves to evoke in the minds of Israelis this most painful of memories while preventing the peace that the people of this region deserve."

And speaking of the peaceful campaign for civil rights carried out by blacks in his own country, he said: "Palestinians must abandon violence. Resistance through violence and killing is wrong and does not succeed."

Obama urged Palestinians to "focus on what they can build."

"The Palestinian Authority must develop its capacity to govern, with institutions that serve the needs of its people," he said.

Hamas -- which has ruled the Gaza Strip for two years after a bloody takeover of the territory in 2007 -- "does have support among some Palestinians," he said, but added that "they also have responsibilities."

Speaking to a group Israel and the West consider a terrorist organisation, he reiterated what Hamas is required to do for engagement with the West.

"To play a role in fulfilling Palestinian aspirations, and to unify the Palestinian

people, Hamas must put an end to violence, recognise past agreements and recognise Israel's right to exist."

Fawzi Barhum, a spokesman for Hamas, said the speech had "many contradictions, all the while reflecting tangible change."

"It is a speech that plays on sentiment and is filled with civilities, which leads us to believe that he aimed to embellish America's image in the world."

Turning to the Jewish state, Obama insisted that it must accept the right of the Palestinians to their own state.

"Israelis must acknowledge that just as Israel's right to exist cannot be denied, neither can Palestine's. The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements," which he said violate previous agreements, undermine peace efforts and "must stop."

He also said Israel must meet its obligations to "ensure that Palestinians can live, and work, and develop their society," saying the continuing humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip and lack of opportunity in the West Bank do not serve Israel's security.

Long-stalled peace talks were revived in late 2007, but made no real progress before the election this year of hawkish Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is a champion of Jewish settlements and has failed to publicly endorse a two-state solution.



PHOTO: AFP

US President Barack Obama (R) and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2R) listen to an explanation by an Egyptian-American art historian (L) as they tour the Sultan Hassan Mosque in Cairo yesterday. Obama took a tour of the medieval mosque in the heart of old Cairo on a trip aimed at repairing rifts with the Muslim world.

Obama can heal West-Islam rift

Says Arab League chief

AFP, London

Barack Obama can end "years of tension and confrontation" between the West and Islam, the Arab League chief said Thursday as the US president sought to mend ties with the Muslim world in Egypt.

Obama could also be an "honest broker" in the Middle East peace process, Amr Moussa told BBC radio.

"The general relationship between the West and Islam was very much affected by policies in the last few years," the secretary-general of the 22-nation bloc said.

"The relationship between the West and Islam -- the years of tension and confrontation should come to an end now."

"Creating a better atmo-

sphere of understanding would really help both sides talk dialogue among each other in order to put to rest this era of confrontation and real bloodshed."

"I'm one of those who are very hopeful that President Obama will talk from different angles and put before the world a new language and a new approach and, in fact, a new vision."

On the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the Egyptian added: "I believe he is moving not to be on our side but to be the honest broker."

"We hope that it will be the same distance between the American administration and both parties and this is how the situation will be resolved."

OAS clears way for Cuba's return after 47 years

AP, San Pedro Sula

The Organisation of American States cleared the way for Cuba's possible return to the group by lifting a 47-year ban on the communist-run country, a move backed by Washington despite initial objections.

The vote by acclamation Wednesday to revoke a 1962 measure suspending the island from the body not only toppled a Cold War landmark but was the latest sign of the end of Cuba's isolation in a region increasingly governed by leftist leaders.

Even traditional US ally El Salvador this week restored ties with Cuba, meaning that every country in the hemisphere except for the United States has re-established relations. The US embargo of Cuba also remains deeply unpopular in much of Latin America.

"At this meeting today we have washed away a stain that had affected us all," said Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, whose leftist Sandinista party returned to power in 2006.

The decision was made by consensus, meaning the United States accepted it, though Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton had lobbied personally for requiring Cuba to make democratic reforms and improve respect for human rights.

Still, Clinton applauded the final vote. "Many member countries originally sought to lift the 1962 suspension and allow Cuba to return immediately, without

conditions," Clinton said in a statement issued by the State Department in Washington.

"Others agreed with us that the right approach was to replace the suspension which has outlived its purpose after nearly half a century with a process of dialogue and a future decision that will turn on Cuba's commitment to the organisation's values," she added.

Clinton herself left the meeting before the final vote. The meeting dragged on so long Tuesday night that she did not even have time to deliver a prepared speech of 1,500 words before flying out of Honduras to join President Barack Obama in Egypt.

The OAS decision was angrily criticised in the US by opponents of Cuban president Raul Castro and his older brother, former leader Fidel Castro.

US Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Florida Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said the vote only appeased Cuba.

"Now we know where the priorities of the OAS lie," the Cuban-born Ros-Lehtinen said in a statement. "Rather than upholding democratic principles and fundamental freedoms, OAS member states, led by the OAS Secretary General, could not move quickly enough to appease their tyrannical idols in Cuba."

"Today's decision by the OAS is an affront to the Cuban people and to all who struggle for freedom, democracy, and fundamental human rights," she added.

UN warns against disease outbreak in Pak camps

AFP, Islamabad

UN officials warned yesterday against potential disease outbreaks among two million Pakistanis displaced by an army offensive against the Taliban, reiterating that aid money was running out.

The UN has appealed for 543 million dollars to help the displaced, but Daniel Baker, from the UN Population Fund, said the health sector had so far received only 11 percent of the requested amount.

"With the monsoon season fast approaching, concerns are growing about an increase in avoidable sickness and death due to disease outbreaks, such as acute respiratory infection, acute diarrhoea, malaria and meningitis."

He added: "69,300 women

are pregnant. Nearly six thousand women displaced in the conflict are expected to give birth within the next month."

UN officials said donors had only pledged 22 percent of the total money needed for food, medicine, shelter and other assistance.

"More and more people are coming in the camps. Their hosts are running out of money -- we will face very severe problems if we have no sufficient funds," said Manuel Bessler, head of the UN humanitarian agency in Pakistan.

"Some sectors have already indicated that supplies such as food and essential medicines may not be sustainable beyond early July unless the international community rapidly and generously responds to these acute needs."

US offers Pak refugees aid, not security

Holbrooke visits Pakistanis at tent camps

AP, Mardan

A top US envoy visited Pakistani refugees who have fled fighting between their country's military and Taliban guerrillas and told them yesterday that the United States can't offer them security, but it can offer them aid.

"It's up to the Pakistan army to give you security that is not our job," Richard Holbrooke said, going tent by tent to talk to refugees in a camp in Mardan. But he said the US could help on the humanitarian front. "We are giving assistance."

The visit in Pakistan's northwest by Holbrooke, the top US envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, is one of a series of unusually high-profile gestures by US officials here in the wake of the refugee crisis. Up to 3 million people have been displaced by the Pakistani military's month-old operation in the Swat Valley and surrounding areas a battle the US supports.

US officials who visit or work in Pakistan tend to be careful in advertising their presence or aid projects over worries about security in a country where anti-Americanism runs deep. On Wednesday, Holbrooke rejected a purported claim by Osama bin Laden that the US was responsible for the refugees' displacement.

The US has already pledged \$110 million in aid to the refugees, and the White House is pushing to send another \$200 million. The vast majority of the evacuees have been staying with relatives and friends, while about 200,000 are in tent camps.

Holbrooke and his entourage flew into the camps using four helicopters whose arrival spurred a quick sandstorm in the already dusty, hot camps. The group was accompanied by a heavy contingent of US and Pakistani security.

TI brands Indian political parties and civil servants as most corrupt

ANI, New Delhi

Politicians and civil servants are rated to be the most corrupt persons according to the 2009 Global Corruption Barometer (GCB) released by Transparency International, (TI) the global body monitoring corruption in governance.

The Indian chapter of the Transparency International, disclosed this here on Wednesday.

The Barometer, a global public opinion survey by the TI found that 58 percent of the Indian respondents identified politicians to be the single most corrupt individuals.

Civil servants and allied public officials were rated by 13 percent of respondents as the second most corrupt persons in the country.

According to SK Agarwal, Vice Chairman of the Indian chapter of TI, there many politicians and businessmen who have illegally stashed funds in tax havens and nine ministers in the present in the Cabinet have criminal cases pending against them.

Reshaping of ties depends on Pak sincerity: Patil

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

President Pratibha Patil Thursday said the reshaping of relations with Pakistan would depend on its 'sincerity' in preventing terrorist groups from launching attacks against India.

"My government will seek to reshape our relationship with Pakistan depending on the sincerity of Pakistan to confront groups who launch terrorist attacks against India from its territory," Patil said in her address to the joint session of parliament.

The India-Pakistan peace process has been frozen in the wake of the 26/11 Mumbai carnage that New Delhi blames on elements operating from across the border. On Tuesday, a Pakistani court released terror group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) founder Hafiz Saeed, who India says masterminded the Mumbai attacks that claimed over 170

lives, including those of 26 foreigners.

Patil said India's foreign policy will pursue the country's 'enlightened national interest', maintaining its strategic autonomy and independent decision-making.

Saying that working with neighbours will be accorded the "highest priority", the president said the government will 'sincerely work with our neighbours to ensure that outstanding issues are addressed and the full potential of our region is realized'.

On the other neighbours in South Asia, Patil said: "In Nepal and Bangladesh, where multi-party democracy has returned, India will work closely with both countries to continue expanding bilateral ties for mutual benefit."

Referring to Afghanistan, she said that India will continue its assistance for the reconstruction



PHOTO: AFP

A combination of handout images obtained in London yesterday shows Indian nationals Jatinder Kumar Sharma, (L) Rakhi Shahi (Top R) and Neelam Sharma (Bottom R). A British court jailed the Indian man and two women Wednesday for providing fake degrees and identities to hundreds of immigrants, in what prosecutors said was the biggest visa scam ever seen in Britain.

US-Russia nuclear disarmament talks 'productive': US

AFP, Geneva

Russia and the United States have had "productive" talks on cutting their nuclear arsenals, the senior US negotiator said in Geneva yesterday.

US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control Rose Gottemoeller told the international conference on Disarmament that the two superpowers were seeking to reduce their nuclear weapons below the levels set in the 1991 START treaty.

"President Obama and Russian President Medvedev have instructed that the new agreement achieve reductions lower than those in existing arms control agreements, and that the agreement should include effective verification measures drawn up from our experience in implementing START," she said.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Obama offers hope for ME peace

AP, Washington

President Barack Obama offered the world the audacity to hope for peace in the Middle East and a better understanding between the United States and Muslims. Still, a president known for his soaring oratory admitted his words alone would not change a thing.

"No single speech can eradicate years of mistrust," he said.

A vast array of knotty issues cloud American relations with the Muslim world, but none rankles like US ties to Israel and massive support for the Jewish state in the heart of the Arab Middle East.

In a sharp break with US policy, Obama approached his historic Cairo speech by opening a public rift last month with Israeli Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu, publicly demanding that he stop building settlements on the West Bank. The newly elected Israeli leader has refused, leaving him openly on the outs with Washington and in a position that could shorten his tenure at the top of the Jewish state's government.

Obama said the US-Israeli bond was "well-known" and "unbreakable," but that Washington "does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements."

Obama's approach was sweeping and evenhanded throughout the speech.

In the face of likely criticism at home, the deeply pragmatic American president, a black man whose father and grandfather were Muslim, owned up to serious American mistakes in relations with followers of the Prophet Muhammad. But

he warned, recalling the terrorist attacks in the US on Sept. 11, 2001: "America can never tolerate violence by extremists."

Key to cutting through the Middle East thicket and bettering US-Muslim relations, Obama said, was construction of a durable peace among Arabs and Israelis, a willingness on all sides to make difficult and politically dangerous sacrifices to reach a goal that has eluded the world for six decades.

Speaking from the lectern in an ornate hall at Cairo University in a speech also sponsored by al-Azhar, one of the oldest centres of Islamic learning, Obama issued an ambitious seven-point manifesto for improving US ties with the Islamic world and its estimated 1.5 billion Muslims. While the majority of the

world's Muslims live in Asia, the growing Islamic militancy took root largely in the Middle East. The dramatic strike against the United States on 9/11 was the work of Arabs under the direction of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who was born in Saudi Arabia.

Bin Laden cited anger at US support for Israel and the presence of American forces in Saudi Arabia as the guiding grievances of the terrorist organization that drew American forces into wars in Afghanistan, where bin Laden was believed to be hiding, and Iraq, which was flooded by al-Qaeda fighters after the US invasion in 2003.

Those wars and US policy toward Israel have produced a growing belief in the Muslim world that the United States is at war with Islam.

Aila-hit embankments

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Rabeya Khatun, another inhabitant of the village, said if the embankment is not repaired immediately their tiny shacks will be washed away.

A number of inhabitants in the two affected upazilas have been repairing the small breaches in the embankment both voluntarily and under the food for work programme.

Many of them said they don't want the Water Development Board to repair the damaged embankment rather they want to do the work on their own under supervision of the army.

Abdur Razzaque said the government has already allocated Tk 2 crore as assis-

tance for rebuilding houses in Shyamnagar and Assasuni upazilas.

The minister also said the government has already allocated Tk 116 crore on an urgent basis for repairing the embankments.

"The government is going to allocate more money to tackle such disasters. It also estimated that Tk 340 crore will be required to make the embankments strong," he said.

Razzaque also said the affected people would be shifted to safer places if the embankments could not be repaired soon.

"If needed, we shall construct temporary tin-shed structures for them," he said adding that the relief programme will be contin-

ued until the affected people are rehabilitated.

The minister said he was surprised to see the affected people repairing the dams voluntarily amid hardship.

About 27 kilometres of the dam covering several unions of Shyamnagar upazila was completely destroyed and another 135-kilometre area of the dam was partially damaged.

Besides, around 3.9 kilometre area of the embankment in Assasuni upazila was washed away by tidal surge and another 98-kilometre area was partially damaged.

Meanwhile, the Public Health Engineering Department reinstalled 73 tub-wells in Gabura union in the last two days.