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As Arab world reels, Obama takes it country by country

by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Xinhua) -- With Libya inching toward a full-blown civil war while unrest continues to sweep the Arab world, U.S. President Barack Obama is approaching the embattled region on a case-by-case basis.

The president has thus far avoided proclaiming any overarching strategy, although he has stated repeatedly that he stands against violence and is in favor of democracy.

He has openly called on Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi to step down, but has handled other countries' leaders more gently, such as Bahrain.

That approach, however, has led critics to charge the administration with being inconsistent -- calling for the resignation of some leaders, including now former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, while treating others with what some billed as kid gloves.

Still, the White House, as well as some analysts, argued that each country in the Middle East and North Africa contains its own mix of unique complexities that can not be addressed by an all enveloping strategy.

"The wave of unrest has caught many countries, including the United States, off guard," said Reva Bhalla, director of analysis at global intelligence company Stratfor.

"So we've seen the administration trying to piece together a strategy," she said. "But you have to distinguish between the different circumstances and the difference in the strategic level of threats with each of these countries."

Indeed, events in Egypt differ vastly from those of Libya. While Mubarak stepped down relatively peacefully, rebels in Libya are clashing with government forces.

"To some extent, the Obama administration's response to the uprisings in the Arab world must be ad hoc," said Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute.

"Each country must be assessed differently, based on their level of political and economic development and their connection to U.S. national interests," she said.

With Libya, what some view as conflicting statements reflect Obama's attempt to balance two sides. On one side, neoconservatives and liberal hawks are calling for intervention because they say it will benefit rebels in the short term. On the other side, those against intervention harbor concerns that it might in the long run undermine the legitimacy of protesters, she said.

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