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Obama Pledge to Engage UN Runs Into Resentment of U.S. Power

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By Bill Varner



Sept. 24 (Bloomberg) -- President **Barack Obama** pledged a new era of U.S. engagement at the **United Nations** in his first address to the world body yesterday, and urged other leaders to join him. Old rifts surfaced soon after the applause faded.

Libyan leader **Muammar Qaddafi**, speaking from the same podium afterward, tried to rip in two a pocket-sized copy of the UN Charter during a speech that ranged from colonialism to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. He said the U.S. veto in the **Security Council** violated its provision that all members be treated equally and called for power to go to the majority of the 192 nations that comprise the General Assembly.

The disparity signaled the difficulty Obama will have working through the UN to combat climate change, ease the impact of the global financial crisis, end the Middle East conflict and curb the nuclear ambitions of Iran and North Korea. It won't be easy in a "body that has often become a forum for sowing discord instead of forging common ground," Obama said.

"President Obama has a very difficult task if he expects to invest the United Nations with new credibility," **Christopher Preble**, foreign policy director at the CATO Institute public-policy group in Washington, said. "The UN is a weak and fractured institution whose limited powers and authority have been steadily undermined by a progression of U.S. presidents."

Obama is spending three days at the UN to make the case that his approach will break with that of his predecessor, President **George W. Bush**, who often chided the body for inaction and sidestepped its authority to invade Iraq. Obama spoke at a climate change conference and today will become the first president to preside over a Security Council meeting as it adopts a U.S.-drafted resolution affirming commitments to constrain the spread of nuclear weapons.

'Concrete Actions'

"For those who question the character and cause of my nation, I ask you to look at the concrete actions that we have taken in just nine months," Obama said. "America will live its values, and we will lead by example."

Obama cautioned other countries to give up their "almost reflexive anti-Americanism" that he said has served as an excuse for avoiding action on issues from terrorism to poverty.

"Those who used to chastise America for acting alone in the world cannot now stand by and wait for America to solve the world's problems alone," he said.

Secretary-General **Ban Ki-moon** echoed that theme, telling the General Assembly that "if ever there was a time to act in a spirit of renewed multilateralism, a moment to create a United Nations of genuine collective action, it is now."

Iranian Criticism

Iranian President **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** later highlighted the potential for continued discord with a speech that, like Qaddafi's, questioned the credibility of the UN and expressed concern about U.S. domination of the Security Council. Iran has ignored the panel's demands that its nuclear work be reined in.

"It is not acceptable that the United Nations and the Security Council, whose decisions must represent all nations and governments by the application of the most democratic methods in their decision-making processes, be dominated by a few governments and serve their interests," Ahmadinejad said.

While Obama's speech was warmly received and some speakers praised his commitment to the UN, others including the presidents of Bolivia and South Africa said the U.S. should end a trade embargo on Cuba and blamed American capitalism for the financial crisis.

'Absurd Doctrine'

Brazilian President **Luiz Inacio Lula** da Silva, who referred in his speech to the "absurd doctrine that markets could regulate themselves," broke with the U.S. by later saying Ahmadinejad would visit Brazil in November to discuss enhanced trade and cooperation in the two countries' oil industries. Lula said he plans to visit Tehran sometime early next year.

Lula said Ahmadinejad assured him that Iran was developing its nuclear industry for peaceful, civilian uses and he has so far seen no evidence it was evading international norms.

"I've told all the presidents who ask me about Iran the same thing I'll tell you: I defend for Iran the same rights with respect to nuclear energy that I do for Brazil," Lula said.

Just before Ahmadinejad started into his remarks, which prompted a walkout by American diplomats, the five veto-wielding nations on the Security Council and Germany gathered and declared that the country should demonstrate the peaceful intent of its nuclear work.

A statement read by British Foreign Secretary **David Miliband** on behalf of the U.S., China, France and Russia, along with Germany, said Iran should "build confidence" by opening its program fully to inspections.

Obama told the UN that Iran and North Korea must live up to their international nuclear commitments.

Spain's Prime Minister **Luis Zapatero** called Obama's speech a "historic moment, a transcendental change for the United Nations."

Even Qaddafi, once branded a terrorist by the U.S., wasn't entirely negative, saying it was "the beginning of a change" and that Libya "would be happy if Obama could stay forever as the president of America."

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