



Kerry Begins Work as Secretary of State

By: Scott Stearns – February 4, 2013

STATE DEPARTMENT — U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry has begun work as America's top diplomat. On his first day in office, he stressed the need to protect universal human rights.

Arriving the first day on his new job, Kerry told State Department employees he will continue President Obama's push to make the world a safer place.

"This president's vision, and what he has implemented through your efforts over the course of the last years without any question, has restored America's reputation and place in the world," Kerry said.

He said that reputation can help empower people.

"We get to try to make peace in the world, a world where there is far too much conflict, far too much killing. There are alternatives," Kerry said. "We get to lift people out of poverty. We get to try to cure disease. We get to try to empower people with human rights. We get to speak to those who have no voice."

Human rights were a focus of President Obama's first term, including stopping violence against women in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Human Rights Watch deputy Washington director Sarah Margon says Kerry can do more.

"I'd like to see in the next Obama administration it become an even more central tenet particularly on some of the central national security issues that the administration is going to have to address," Kerry said.

On the Middle East, Kerry has already phoned Israeli President Shimon Peres, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas -- making a personal commitment to pursue peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Kerry also telephoned the foreign ministers of Japan and South Korea. He assured them that North Korea should understand it will face "significant consequences" if it continues "provocative" missile tests.

Speaking to the department's employees, Kerry addressed the sacrifices made by those killed in September at the U.S. mission in the Libyan city of Benghazi.

"The dangers could not be more clear. We are reminded by the stars and names on the wall," Kerry noted. "And we are particularly reminded by Chris Stevens and Glen Dougherty, and Tyrone Woods, and Sean Smith."

Cato Institute analyst Malou Innocent says Kerry has big challenges in Libya.

"It's very difficult to transition from a state-building operation to a nation-building

operation, the sense of creating a cohesive Libyan identity. That's something that Gadhafi exploited to his benefit. He ruled by divide-and-rule, of course. So moving forward we are still going to see a degree of chaos in Libya even as it has a veneer of sort of a Western democracy," he said.

Kerry joked about succeeding two women -- Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice. He told diplomats he has "big heels to fill."