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Exchange With Reporters Aboard Air Force One En Route to Johannesburg, South Africa

June 28, 2013

U.S. Foreign Aid

The President. I just want to emphasize how important the work that we're doing on agriculture is, and I hope you got a sense from those folks who had set up their booths how much of a direct impact it can make in the lives of people in a really concrete way.

Obviously, we've got budget constraints back home, which means that we've got to come up with new and creative ways to promote development and deliver aid, and this Food for the Future program and our New Alliance on Food Security is doing exactly that. Every dollar that we're putting in, we're getting a huge amount of private sector dollars. We're focusing on how do people become more productive as opposed to simply giving them food or giving them medicine.

What we announce later on this trip around Power—what we're calling Power Africa—is going to be utilizing that same model. But what you're really starting to see is people understanding what works, working with small producers, leveraging—so, for example, you notice we're doing nutrition issues, but then also using it as an economic development tool.

And all that creates the kind of critical mass where—in a country like Senegal or Tanzania where maybe 70 percent of the people are involved in agriculture—you can see each one of those small farmers suddenly increasing their income by 20 percent, 30 percent, 50 percent. That then becomes the basis for a nascent middle class in those countries; that in turn can help create local manufacturers, local consumer goods. And eventually, these then become export markets for the United States. So it's not just a matter of alleviating hunger or reducing poverty, it's creating the basis for the entire continent to get incorporated into world markets in a way that ultimately will benefit not just Africa, but also the United States.

So our foreign aid budget is around 1 percent of our total Federal budget. It's chronically the least popular part of our Federal budget. But if you look at the bang for the buck that we're getting when it's done right, when it's well designed and when it's scaled at the local level with input from local folks, it can really make a huge difference. And what we've designed, I think, is so effective that we've been able to see other countries essentially put their money into a similar model, and we're also thereby leveraging all of international assistance around this issue.

So it's something I'm really proud about, and I know Raj Shah already had a chance to brief with you guys, but you should get to know him during the course of this trip because I think he can really give you insight in terms of how much difference this is making.

President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief/Foreign Aid

Q. Can you talk about this—is this what you see as your legacy for Africa: a kind of changed model? I mean, a lot of analysts back in Washington are talking about how you're not making the kind of grand programs that Bush and Clinton did in Africa, and so I'm wondering if you can address that a little bit.

The President. First of all, if you look at a program like PEPFAR, President Bush deserves enormous credit for that. It is really important. And it saved lives of millions of people. But even on PEPFAR, for example, what we're doing is transitioning so that it's not just a matter of delivering antiviral drugs, it's also how do we create a health infrastructure in these countries that's sustainable.

And I think everything we do is designed to make sure that Africa is not viewed as a dependent, as a charity case, but is instead viewed as a partner; that instead of chronically receiving aid, it is starting to get involved in trade, get involved in production, and over time, is going to be able to feed itself, house itself, and produce its own goods. And that's what Africa wants.

Now, some of this is driven by necessity. Given the budget constraints, for us to try to get the kind of money that President Bush was able to get out of the Republican House for massively scaled new foreign aid programs is very difficult. We could do even more with more resources. But if we're working smarter, the amount of good that we can bring about over the next decade is tremendous.

International Relations of African Nations

Q. Mr. President, can you say—one of the criticisms leveled at the United States is that it's fallen behind China in terms of the amount of attention that it gives to Africa. President Xi has made numerous visits; this is your first extended visit. How does the United States compete with China in terms of showing its interest and in the reduced-budget world that we're living in?

The President. Well, first of all, I think it's a good thing that China and India and Turkey and some of these other countries—Brazil—are paying a lot of attention to Africa. This is not a zero-sum game. This is not the cold war. You've got one global market, and if countries that are now entering into middle-income status see Africa as a big opportunity for them, that can potentially help Africa.

What we have going for us, though, is our values, our approach to development; our approach to democracy remains one that is greatly preferable to a country like Senegal. In my discussions, a lot of people are pleased that China is involved in Africa.

On the other hand, they recognize that China's primary interest is being able to obtain access for natural resources in Africa to feed the manufacturers in export-driven policies of the Chinese economy. And oftentimes, that leaves Africa as simply an exporter of raw goods, not a lot of value added—as a consequence, not a lot of jobs created inside of Africa—and it does not become the basis for long-term development.

But we shouldn't view the participation of a country like China or Brazil in Africa as a bad thing. It should be a signal to us, though, that there's great opportunity there and that we cannot afford to be left on the sidelines because we're still stuck with old stereotypes about what Africa's future is going to be.

U.S. Investment in Africa

Q. What kind of commitments do you think U.S. companies are looking for from you on this trip to be able to see Africa as a continent for investment? And what kind of signal does the expo today—what should that be sending to companies back home?

The President. One of the main things that we want American companies to see is that Africa is ready to do business and that there's huge potential there. What African countries have to do—and this is a message I'm delivering consistently—is ensure that there's stability and good governance so that American companies can reduce some of those risks that have nothing to do with business and have to do with, will they be able to get their profits out? Will they have to pay a bribe? Will they have to find ways to negotiate with bureaucracies endlessly?

And that's why our first message in Africa, in Senegal, revolved around issues of democracy, transparency, accountability. There is a huge economic component to that. Those countries where businesses can feel confident that there will be peaceful transitions of power, that corruption is prosecuted, where there's rule of law, where there's protection of private property, where the government is practical and not wildly ideological; that is what will attract American businesses, because I think, when I talk to a lot of CEOs, they see the potential there, but what they don't want to do is find themselves 5 years out, suddenly, with a different government, suddenly, their money is stuck, their workers are being shaken down. That's the kind of thing we want to make sure that we emphasize throughout this trip.

Former President Nelson R. Mandela of South Africa

Q. Sir, looking forward to—your trip in South Africa comes at a time when obviously a lot of people in the region are focused on the ailing health of Nelson Mandela. I know you have a relationship with him. Do you hope to visit him? Do you think that your message there will change?

The President. I think the message will be consistent because it draws on the lessons of Nelson Mandela's own life, that if we focus on what Africa as a continent can do together and what these countries can do when they're unified—as opposed to when they're divided by tribe or race or religion—then Africa's rise will continue. And that's one of the central lessons of what Nelson Mandela accomplished not just as President, but in the struggle to overcome apartheid and his years in prison.

We'll see what the situation is when we land. I don't need a photo op, and the last thing I want to do is to be in any way obtrusive at a time when the family is concerned about Nelson Mandela's condition. I've had the opportunity to meet with him. Michelle and the girls had an opportunity to meet with him. Right now our main concern is with his well-being, his comfort, and with the family's well-being and comfort.

So when we get there, we'll gauge the situation, but I think the main message we'll want to deliver—if not directly to him, but to his family—is simply our profound gratitude for his leadership all these years and that the thoughts and prayers of the American people are with him and his family and his country. I think in that sense, the sentiment of Americans is universally shared around the world.

Q. Have you gotten an update on his condition or talked to his family lately?

The President. We'll find out more when we land.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:22 a.m. In his remarks, he referred to former President George W. Bush; and former President Nelson R. Mandela of South Africa. Audio was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters :: Air Force One.

Names: Bush, George W.; Mandela, Nelson R.; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Shah, Rajiv J.

Subjects: Africa : Agricultural production :: Improvement efforts; Africa : Democracy efforts; Africa : Economic growth and development; Africa : Energy cooperation with U.S.; Africa : Foreign investment and cooperation; Africa : Public health facilities and programs; Africa : U.S. assistance; Brazil : Relations with Africa; China : Relations with Africa; Civil rights : Racial equality; Developing countries : Food aid :: International programs; Developing countries : Food aid :: U.S. programs; Developing countries : Food security, strengthening efforts; Development, U.S. Agency for International; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Foreign policy, U.S : Open government and transparency, promotion efforts; Foreign policy, U.S. : Foreign aid policies :: Funding; HIV/AIDS : Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, President's; India : Relations with Africa; Senegal : Relations with U.S.; South Africa : President Obama's visit; Turkey : Relations with Africa.

DCPD Number: DCPD201300474.