

Administration of Barack Obama, 2013

Remarks at a Young African Leaders Initiative Town Hall Meeting and a Question-and-Answer Session in Johannesburg, South Africa

June 29, 2013

Moderator Nkepile Mabuse. You guys are an amazing crowd. Good afternoon, and welcome to the University of Johannesburg's Soweto campus. My name is Nkepile Mabuse, and I will be the moderator this afternoon.

I really do hope that the strong significance and symbolism of what is happening here in Soweto today does not escape you. There really are no two occasions in recent time that have had a more profound impact on the African people than when Nelson Mandela walked out of prison a free man in 1990 and, of course, the election of Barack Obama in 2008.

Now, these two men are politicians, and their legacies will be judged by history. But there's absolutely no doubt that these two developments in history have had a profound impact on the African Continent. They have brought hope in Africa and also began the process of restoring pride and dignity in the African people.

Now, as I speak to you and as you all know, President Nelson Mandela is lying in hospital, critically ill. The euphoria that engulfed this continent when President Obama was elected is fading, but in this room—look around you—is Africa's brand new hope. These young people are doing amazing things in their communities. They have already been identified as leaders and leaders who are committed to serving others and not themselves.

Exactly 37 years ago this month, young school children here in Soweto braved Apartheid bullets, fighting for freedom. It's no coincidence that a new generation of young people is here today. And like the '76 generation, they refuse to conform, but are inspired to transform their world.

When President Obama launched the Young African Leaders Initiative in 2010, he described them as the Africa that is overlooked. Well, at this moment, the world can see and hear you. President Obama will come here, address you, and then engage you. We will take a question here in South Africa before we cross to Kenya, Uganda, and then Lagos, Nigeria. When the President selects you, please, be proud. Introduce yourselves, and ask a short, sharp, smart question. *[Laughter]*

As a fellow African, I really want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for keeping hope alive in Africa. Please join me in welcoming onstage the 44th President of the United States of America, Barack Obama.

President Obama. Hello, everybody! *Yebo Mzansi!* Oh, it is wonderful to be back in South Africa. Everybody, have a seat, everybody have a seat. Relax. Yes, I'm excited too.

It is wonderful to be here with all these extraordinary young people: young people from across this magnificent country, but also from all across the continent. And I want to give special thanks and special welcome to those who are watching from Nigeria and Uganda and Kenya, a country obviously very close to my heart.

When I travel around the world, this is one of my favorite things to do, meeting and talking with young men and women like you. And our format today, this town hall is a longstanding tradition in America, and I get asked all sorts of things. I remember one event, a person asked a question that's often on a lot of people's minds when I show up: Where's Michelle? *[Laughter]*

Sometimes, people ask me, you seem to have gotten so old since you were elected—[laughter]—what happened?

So this format can be a little humbling, but it energizes me because it gives me a chance to hear from you directly what you're thinking, what you care about, what your vision is. And I'm making this trip to Africa because I believe this is a region on the move. Even as this continent faces great challenges—and they are great, and we can't paper over them or pretend that those challenges don't exist—even as too many Africans still endure tremendous hardship and great injustice, there is, as the song says, a "new Africa": more prosperous, more confident, taking its place on the world stage.

And one of the reasons is because of your generation. And it's fitting that we've gathered here, in Jo'burg, in Soweto, because here we learned that history is in our hands. Not far from here, in Orlando West, two young men came of age who would transform this nation and inspire the world—Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. And President Mandela once said that during all those years in that cell, it was his home here in Soweto—that small red-brick house—that was what he called the "center point of my world."

And obviously, he's on our minds today, and we join the people of the world in sending our prayers to Madiba and his family, because he still inspires us all.

Now, not far from here, on a June morning, young students gathered in peaceful protest for the right to be taught in their own language, for the right to be treated like human beings. And after all the police bullets, after the smoke cleared, the world was shocked by that image: protesters holding the body of a young boy, Hector Pieterse. And what a powerful tribute it is to Hector's sacrifice and to all who struggled that we can gather here today in a free South Africa at a university that serves all South Africans.

And I know the story of Soweto inspires you in your lives, but keep in mind, it inspired me too. The uprising here helped open my mind to a broader world and to our responsibilities to choose between fairness and injustice, between right and wrong. And as a Senator, during my first visit to South Africa, I was able to go to Hector Pieterse's memorial and pay tribute to an African boy who moved the world. And humbled by the sacrifices of all who have gone before us so that we can stand here as free men and women, I am honored to return to Soweto now as President of the United States of America.

Now, tomorrow I'll be down in Cape Town at the University of Cape Town, and I'll speak about the future that we can build together, Africans and Americans. And that's where Robert Kennedy delivered his eloquent address to another generation of young people. The challenges of our world, he said, demand "the qualities of youth; not a time in life, but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease." That's what young people are. That's the spirit of youth, and it's still true.

That's why 3 years ago, I launched a new effort to make sure we're tapping those qualities of youth; the imagination, the courage, the "yes we can" attitude of young Africans like you. It's our Young African Leaders Initiative, and I kicked it off by welcoming young men and women from across Africa to the White House, and we had a town hall similar to this one. I think some of you were there, in fact.

And since then, we've helped empower young people across this continent with new skills and entrepreneurship and leadership and new partnerships in education and health and technology. Michelle came here to Soweto for a forum with some inspiring young women, and she's here today in Jozi, meeting with students who—[laughter]—did I say that right?—meeting with students who, like you, are going to determine the future of your countries.

So today I'm proud to announce a significant expansion of this initiative. We're launching a new program that's going to give thousands of promising young Africans like you the opportunity to come to the United States and develop your skills at some of our best colleges and universities.

It's called the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders, and I hope all of you apply because we're joining with our top schools, public and private. We'll focus on civic leadership and public administration and business and entrepreneurship, the skills you need to serve your communities and start and grow businesses and run effective ministries. And you'll interact with Americans from all walks of life, because our citizens—especially our young people—can learn from you too. You'll meet with leaders in business and nonprofits and government, including me. And I look forward to welcoming you at a summit that I'll host in Washington, because I want to hear directly from you: your hopes, your dreams, what we can achieve together.

And your time in America will be just the beginning. When you come back home, new grants will help you turn your ideas into new businesses and new nonprofits. And we're going to partner with American companies here in Africa to provide internships and mentoring and job opportunities to help you grow into the next generation of business leaders. We're going to partner with your Governments and regional organizations here in Africa and foundations and civil society to amplify your voices as you stand up for democracy and equality. And with the connections you make as a Washington Fellow, you'll have something else for the rest of your life, and that is a network of Africans and Americans ready to collaborate on the future that you want to build.

So this won't be the most expensive program that we have, but I actually believe this is going to end up being one of the most important. And it's important to me personally, because it's a great way for me to show my faith and confidence in all of you. I believe in you, and I intend to make this a lasting part of our engagement with Africa beyond my Presidency, for years to come.

We want to empower entrepreneurs like Fred Swaniker. Where's Fred? He's from Ghana. Where is he? There he is. *[Applause]* So Fred has got a fan club over here. *[Laughter]* Fred helped to start a biotech company and now uses his expertise to help other young Africans develop their leadership skills so that they can come back and put those skills to use serving their communities, starting businesses, creating jobs. So thank you, Fred, for the great work that you're doing.

We want to empower citizens like Khadija Patel. Where's Khadija? Khadija? So Khadija is a fearless journalist here in South Africa. She's reported on Sudan and Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo. She's exposed the roots of conflict; she's challenged leaders as a voice for peace and justice. So we're very proud of the work that you do, Khadija. Thank you.

We want to empower advocates like Jacob Jabari. Where's Jacob? Right here. So here in South Africa, Jacob decided he was not going to hide the fact that he was HIV-positive; he embraced it, he became a counselor. He helps guide others, because he says the key to saving lives and slowing the spread of AIDS is an honest approach, and that takes great courage. Thank you, Jacob.

And we want to empower women like Lebo Bogapane. Lebo? Growing up, Lebo endured domestic abuse and violence, which led to homelessness and hunger. Over many years, she didn't simply rebuild her own life; she built a crisis center here in South Africa that's helped thousands of women and children escape abuse as well. What a great legacy. Thank you, Lebo.

So building the future that you seek, realizing the vision that you have, not just for your own countries, but for the world, it will not be easy. It will not be easy. But as you go forward, I want

you to think of the man who's in our prayers today. Think about 27 years in prison. Think about the hardships and the struggles and being away from family and friends.

Reflecting on his years in prison, Nelson Mandela wrote that there were dark moments that tested his faith in humanity, but he refused to give up. And he said: "I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being optimistic is keeping one's head pointed towards the sun, one's feet moving forward."

So in your lives, there will be time to test your faith. But no matter how old you grow, I say to all of you today, don't lose those qualities of youth: your imagination, your optimism, your idealism. Because the future of this continent is in your hands, and if you keep your head pointed towards the Sun and you keep your feet moving forward, I promise you will have no better friend and partner than the United States of America.

Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you.

So now I get to do what I really want to do, which is to hear from you. So why don't we open it up for questions. And I understand that we've got somebody from South Africa here perhaps.

Ms. Mabuse. Yes, the plan is to get somebody here in Soweto before we move across to other parts of the continent.

President Obama. Okay.

Ms. Mabuse. The choice is yours, Mr. President.

President Obama. Well, this is a good-looking group. Let me—[laughter]—I'm going to call on this young lady right here. Introduce yourself.

African Growth and Opportunity Act

Q. Good afternoon, President Obama. My name is Melissa. I'm an attorney, and I'm passionate about telecoms in Africa. My question is: The African Growth and Opportunities Act, the term expires in 2015, and I understand there's a bill which provides for an extension to 2019. Do you think this bill will be passed? And if it isn't passed, what do you think the impact will be on small states in Africa that are benefiting, such as Lesotho and Togo?

President Obama. Well, it's a great question. By the way, what kind of law are you practicing?

Q. Oh, right now I actually do cross-border African work.

President Obama. Excellent.

Q. [Inaudible]

President Obama. Fantastic. Well, for those of you who are not as familiar with it, the program we call AGOA is basically a trade arrangement that allows probably 95 percent of goods from Africa to come into the United States without tariffs, duty free. And as a consequence, it obviously gives African exports a greater advantage.

And the whole idea is that historically, if you look at the relationship between Africa and the rest of the global market, dating back to colonial days, the idea was somehow that raw materials get sent somewhere else, they get produced somewhere or refined somewhere else; sometimes, they're sold back to Africa, but the jobs, the value, the profits are all someplace else.

And we graduated from those colonial times to the idea of aid, which continues to be critically important. There are parts of Africa that—where, right now people just need food, or right now people just need medicine, and it is the obligation of wealthier nations to help deliver that food or that medicine.

But everywhere I go in Africa, what's very clear is people want to break out of a dependency trap. The idea is not that Africa somehow should be the ward of some other country. What we need is an Africa that is building, manufacturing, creating value, inventing, and then sending those products around the world and receiving products in return in fair terms of trade. And if we do that, then there's no reason why Africa cannot succeed.

So part of what I'm trying to highlight during this trip is the enormous opportunities for an Africa that is intimately integrated into the world market. I want small and medium-sized businesses and entrepreneurs and startups here in Africa to see their potential not just in the local market, but to be able to sell goods and service all around the world and to bring those profits back to Africa and reinvest in Africa and hire Africans.

And so as part of that, we want to make sure that the United States is a critical trading partner. And by the way, we're not doing it out of charity. We're doing it because if Africa is doing well, then now we've got a market of people who want to buy more iPads and—*[Laughter]*—Boeing airplanes, and all the good stuff that we sell, right? And Africa, by the way, is the youngest continent, which means that demographically, this is going to be a larger and larger share of the world market.

So, specifically, in terms of AGOA, you're right. The current AGOA structure expires in 2015. It is my hope that we get it renewed. Now, what I mentioned to President Zuma today, and I said this at a press conference, is that we will have to engage in some negotiations to find ways to both improve what we're currently doing, but also to reflect on the fact that South Africa is becoming more and more successful, and that U.S. businesses—in order for me to get it through Congress in the United States, U.S. businesses have to feel as if they're getting a level playing field relative to, for example, some of the European companies who are able to operate here, because there's a free trade agreement between Europe and the United States.

But I'm confident that with good negotiations, that we should be able to get it done. The broader point I want to make, though, is that the future is going to be in creating value here in Africa and making sure then that Southeast Asia and China and Turkey, and all these other places around the world that everybody is starting to see the benefits of global trade patterns. And Africa cannot just be a source of raw materials for somebody else. It has to be a source of the kinds of products and services and imagination that is going to be the future of the 21st century. Thank you.

Ms. Mabuse. We have a young person in Kenya who has a question for you. Kenya, you ready? There we go.

[At this point, live video of a group in Nairobi, Kenya, displayed on the monitors.]

Kenyan Moderator. Thank you, South Africa. You are watching us, broadcasted to you live from Nairobi here in Kenya's capital. And indeed I'm joined by eight young Kenyans who have come in from five different counties within the country, quite excited. I think I speak for all of them when I say that, indeed, it's an honor to be able to engage with you, Mr. President, while directly during this program.

And I'll just get right to it and give an opportunity for one of the Kenyans who is with me here in studio to be able to ask a question to you, Mr. President. Margaret, you have the floor now.

Kenya/Democracy in African Nations/Economic Development in African Nations

Q. Thank you, Katherine. *Jambo*, Barack Obama, President. We are honored to be with you live today this afternoon from Nairobi, Kenya. Our question to you really is, given the recent shift of trade ties of Kenya to the East, how does this impact on American foreign policy towards

Kenya? And does the ICC indictment of our President and his Deputy prevent the U.S. from engaging with Kenya both politically and economically? In addition, Mr. President, many Kenyan youth would like to know, what are your thoughts and plans on youth empowerment in the devolved structure of governance to Kenya? Thank you.

Kenyan Moderator. Now, Mr. President, as you prepare to respond to that question, I'm sure you're alive to the fact that there has been a lot of speculation in the Kenyan media and also in the social media for your reasons for not visiting Kenya on your second tour of Africa. Maybe if you recall, in an interview that you did have with this channel, that is way back on the 1st of June 2010, you did a promise that during your tenure as President of the United States of America, you will be touring Kenya. Well, will you still keep your word on that? *[Laughter]*

President Obama. Well, *asante sana.* It's wonderful to see all of you. *[Laughter]* First of all, let me just say that I'm going to be President for another 3½ years, so—*[laughter]* One of the things that you learn as President is not only do people want you to fulfill your promises, but they want you to fulfill your promises yesterday. *[Laughter]*

And part of the reason that I wasn't able to visit Kenya this time is I've been to Kenya multiple times and there hadn't been a sustained visit by me in West Africa; and then South Africa, given the importance of the work that we're doing together; Tanzania is a country I hadn't visited before. So I was trying to spread the wealth a little bit in terms of my visit.

But what's also true, I won't deny, is that Kenya just had an election. I was very proud to see the restraint in which the election was held. We did not see a repeat of the violence that we saw in the last election. But with a new administration that's also having to manage some of the international issues around the ICC, I did not think it was the optimal time for me to visit. But as I said, I'm going to—I've got 3½ years. So if in 3 years and 7 months, I'm not in Kenya, then you can fault me for not following through on my promise. *[Laughter]*

You raise the issue of whether our attitudes towards Kenya changed because of Kenya's orientation towards trade and commerce with the East. And this was asked of me before; it's a general question that I get during this visit—people saying, well, China is here a lot, and is this what's motivating America to want to be more involved. And I want to make two points.

First of all, our commitment to Africa is based on our belief in Africa's promise and Africa's future, and we want to be part of that future. Second of all, I think everybody should be involved in Africa. I want China, and I want India, and I want Brazil, and I want Singapore—everybody, come on down—*[laughter]*—to Africa because 6 of the 10 fastest growing economies in the world are right here in Africa.

You are seeing the—a shift inside of Africa in which a commitment to democracy and transparency is beginning to take hold. I just visited Senegal, where President Sall has embarked on a reform agenda, including, by the way, shortening his term from 7 years to 5 years, and a belief that, for example, members who join the government need to disclose their assets—just basic measures that can help to root out corruption.

And so when you start seeing these changes, everybody should be excited about wanting to do business here in Africa and doing business with Kenya. Now, what I said during a press conference today I want to repeat, which is I want to make sure that as countries come to Africa, that it's benefiting Africans. So if somebody is building a road here in Africa, make sure they're hiring some Africans. If there's going to be manufacturing taking place of raw materials, locate some of those plants here in Africa.

And so I do want to make sure that whoever you're dealing with—and as you enter into government and business—whoever you're dealing with, making sure you're getting a good deal

that's benefiting the people here and can help to spur on broad-based development. And hopefully, that's the kind of relationship that you'll be able to develop with the United States of America. And that's the kind of relationship I want Kenya to have with every country on Earth.

We're in a global economy with a global supply chain, and I don't want Africa to continually just be at the bottom of the supply chain. You produce the raw materials, sold cheap, and then all the way up the chain somebody else is making the money and creating the jobs and the value.

So part of what your generation's challenge will be is making sure that, first of all, you have a transparent, accountable, noncorrupt, open government, because economic development is not going to happen in the absence of that kind of certainty. That's what businesses want. They don't want to have to pay a bribe just to get phone lines installed in their business. They don't want to have to hire somebody's cousin just to open a business. And we have to be honest about it. In a lot of countries, that's still the case, and that discourages investment.

And then as you move into positions of power, I want to make sure that you're negotiating a good deal with these other countries. Now, it's got to be realistic. It's got to be based on what assets do you bring to bear. And initially, at least in some countries and in some regions in parts of Africa, you're looking at a certain type of manufacturing or a certain type of industry that may not be very capital intensive, for example, because there may not be as much capital initially to invest. So it may start at a smaller scale, but continually upgrading and improving the prospects for Africa, I think, will require that kind of tough, hardheaded negotiations. But I want every country to be here.

Last point on Kenya—I already made this for all countries—yes, I want young people to be involved in holding their governments accountable. Now, there is a lot of variety here in Africa in terms of quality of governance. And I don't want to reinforce for the American press that are here this attitude that Africa is just one big piece of land on the map. Right?

There's a lot of variation. Some countries are doing great work when it comes to accountability and democracy and an act of civil society and a free press and freedom of assembly. And some countries are not doing as well. But what's exciting right now is you're starting to see more and more a norm, a standard, take hold in Africa. And young people, I think especially, have high expectations about how government should function, and it should function for the public good, not for the benefit of just a few. And people should be able to speak their mind, and they should be able to organize without fear of retribution. And they should be able to cast a ballot without problem.

And South Africa, I think, has been a great model. This is one of the greatest legacies of Nelson Mandela—is to show that through a commitment to the constitution and rule of law, and equal treatment for all people, that a country can prosper despite a tragic history. And the same should be true in Kenya, which is why I was heartened that the process of the last election at least did not result in chaos.

And that should be true for every country. And President Zuma said something important today at the press conference, and I'm going to see what we can do to work with them. The African Union I think is trying to create sort of a peer review system so that it's not just the United States coming in and lecturing some African country that's not observing democracy, it's fellow Africans who are saying, what are you doing? Why are you suppressing your people? Why are you throwing political dissidents in jail? Why are you blocking people's ability to organize new political parties?

And when peers are organizing in that fashion, then slowly, standards get raised and new norms are established, and all of you can be at the forefront of that. Thank you, Kenya.

Ms. Mabuse. We are going to stay in East Africa and take a question from Kampala, Uganda.

President Obama. Fantastic.

[*Live video of a group in Kampala, Uganda, displayed on the monitors.*]

Ugandan Moderator. Hello from Kampala in Uganda, "the pearl of Africa," as we are known. I am Nancy Kacungira, a news presenter with NTV Uganda. And Uganda is a very youthful nation; more than half of our population is actually under the age of 15. I'm here today with a group of vibrant and dynamic young people. And as you can see, they are very excited to be addressing President Obama today and asking him a question.

Now, I've had the chance to interact with the young people here today, and they're all great young leaders in their own right. And they all have different backgrounds and different experiences, but I've found that one of the things they do have in common is their passion: their passion for a better Uganda and for a better Africa. Mr. President, one of them is now going to ask you a question on behalf of the rest of the group.

Entrepreneurship/Economic Development in African Nations

Q. Hello, Mr. President. It's an honor. My name is Eirene Ikomon. My question comes on behalf of everyone seated here with me. Unfortunately, it's also regarding trade. Mr. President, as young Ugandan leaders, we are looking to the world for equal business partners and commitments and not necessarily aid. We are not looking for donors. And yet, Mr. President, the policy you have just described right now seems to emphasize help coming in from the U.S., but emphasizing offering jobs and employment within the countries that they come into. As young leaders, Mr. President, we want to do the businesses at home and be the ones to own our home markets. So how do you, Mr. President, plan on assisting us in reaffirming the U.S. policy to achieve this vision?

President Obama. Well, with respect to U.S. policy, I think you mischaracterize it, because our policy is to see success here in Africa. Now, there's no doubt that U.S. businesses also want to sell into Africa, because as President of the United States, I want to create some jobs in Africa as well.

But my attitude is that the more successful African entrepreneurs are, then the more they're going to be purchasing and interested in purchasing U.S. goods. And conversely, when the economy in the United States is doing strong, then we're going to buy more from Africa, and everybody's standards of living can rise. But as you heard me say earlier, I completely agree with you that we want more investment and value creation here in Africa.

Now, one thing we haven't spoken about, which I think is critical, is intra-African trade. All too often, it's easier to export, say, tea and coffee from East Africa or flowers from East Africa to Europe than it is to export it someplace else in Africa.

And part of that is the legacy of colonialism, an orientation out of Africa rather than internal to Africa. Part of it is a lack of basic infrastructure, so port facilities, trains, rail, roads. So one of the things that we're going to be very interested in is working with the African Union as well as various regional organizations to find ways that we can start linking up markets inside of Africa, because particularly for new businesses, if you're starting a business here in South Africa, then the best chance you have initially for export might be closer to home, one of the surrounding countries.

If Uganda—if you have a business that you want to get started, and initially, you've gotten your product popular inside of Uganda, the next step before you think about selling to the United

States, you might say to yourself, let me start selling some in Kenya, or let me start selling in Tanzania or Rwanda. And so part of what we have to do is to find additional ways in which Africans can also trade with each other.

The last point I will make—because it's related to trade and capacity-building—I just came, as I said, from Senegal. And one of the things that we were featuring was our Feed the Future Program and a food security alliance that we're creating here in Africa. And we've already gotten nine countries to join, and Senegal just determined that it was going to join as well. But we've already helped 7 million small farmers in Africa to pool their resources, access lower credit, link themselves together as one producer group so that they can market and sell more effectively. And we've seen those farmers increase their yields and their sales by 10, 20, 30, in some cases, 50 or 100 percent.

I met with a young woman farmer who had started off with one hectare, now has 16. She has been able to achieve enough growth that she has now bought a tractor. She's hired eight people. Now, that's not what we ordinarily think of as business or entrepreneurship, but if you think about the number of Africans who are involved in agriculture and giving them the tools where suddenly, they're getting better prices for their crops, they've got access to a marketplace, they now are getting enough credit to be able to mechanize their operations, and now suddenly, they're able to hire some people in their surrounding villages, you've just suddenly seen a small business grow. And the next step may be then they start doing some small food processing. And next thing you know, now they're suddenly supplying these processed foods to a school. And next thing you know, they're supplying those processed foods to the whole country.

And so not every business is going to be an Internet business, an app—[laughter]—I mean, I know that's what young people are all about—I'm just going to create an app. I'm the next Facebook. That's great, and I hope some of you do that, but when we think of development of Africa as a whole, especially if we're thinking about broad-based development, then part of what we have to recognize is that a huge number of people inside of Africa are still in the agricultural sector, and the work that we're doing is trying to create capacity for those small farmers who are essentially small entrepreneurs to be successful, because if they've got more money in their pockets, now they can afford to buy your app.

So thank you very much for the question, Uganda. Appreciate it.

Ms. Mabuse. Mr. President, we're moving over to West Africa now, and we're going to take a question from Lagos, Nigeria.

[Live video of a group in Lagos, Nigeria, displayed on the monitors.]

Nigerian Moderator: Well, welcome, Mr. President, to Lagos, Nigeria, home to perhaps Africa's biggest youth population. I'm Maupe Ogun for Channels Television here. And here with me in the studio are a selection of some of Nigeria's brightest and best, and I must tell you, Mr. President, they're mostly women, so you better be careful around them. [Laughter] And they say they're on the march, and they have their question ready. Over now to Aisha.

Education/Economic Development in African Nations/Terrorism

Q. Good afternoon, Mr. President. My name is Aisha Myna, and I represent seven other people here. In acknowledging our challenges and our responsibility as the young leaders of Nigeria to accept our challenges and make the difference, we would like to thank you for your support to Nigeria and Africa as a whole. The largest resource in Nigeria is our human capital, and we would like to ask a two-pronged question.

The first is, how can the United States deepen its investment in deploying technology that will develop our vast human capital as well as the education of her youth? My second question—

it's two-pronged, sorry, Mr. President—considering how long the war on terror has been on for, would you say that we're winning the war on terror, seeing that there are new terrorist groups developing in Africa, one of which is in Nigeria? Thank you.

President Obama. Well, those are both great questions. Thank you.

And before I answer the question, I just want to be clear: I am surrounded by opinionated women in my house all day long—[*laughter*]—so I've got good practice dealing with strong women. You guys haven't met Michelle, but you've probably seen her on TV. She's not shy. [*Laughter*] And Malia and Sasha, they're just taking right up after her. So every night at dinner, I'm surrounded.

In terms of human capital and young people, I think there is no doubt that the most important investment any country can make—not just an African country—any country can make is educating its youth and providing them the skills they need to compete in a highly technological advanced world economy. Countries that do not do that well will not succeed. Countries that excel at training their young people are going to succeed, because these days businesses can go anywhere. And one of the key criteria for any business is, where can I find outstanding workers? Where can I find outstanding people to manage a plant or manage my sales force? And if you have countries with high illiteracy rates or limited skills, you're going to have problems.

And I want to be clear that this is a problem in the United States, not just a problem in Africa. One of the main things that I'm spending a lot of time on is trying to push Congress to improve our early childhood education, because it turns out that children are most susceptible to learning between the ages of 0 and 3. And so working with parents, particularly mothers, around reading to their children, proper nutrition, stimulating activities. Then, when they get to school, making sure that our schools are prepared and redesigned for today, because a lot of the schools in the United States were first created during the agricultural era and aren't always appropriate for what's required today. And then on into what we call community colleges, which are 2-year colleges or 4-year colleges and universities.

[*A noise could be heard from offstage.*]

Somebody should have told my helicopter to quiet down while I'm talking. [*Laughter*]

So across the board, we're having to rethink education and workforce training. And one of the things that we want to do is to partner with a country like Nigeria and identify ways that we can provide direct value added, whether it's in helping to train teachers, helping to incorporate technologies into the education process.

So, for example, one of the things that you hear across the continent is, because a lot of Africans still live in rural areas, it may be difficult for them to access education and schooling once they get beyond a certain level. Well, are there ways in which we can pipe in, essentially, a university into a rural community? And suddenly, you've got the lecturer right there, without the same costs or obligation for a young person to take on when they go to travel far away from home in order to study.

And so I think that there are some excellent ideas that sometimes we're doing country by country, depending on the country plan. But this is an area where I would love to get more input from young people in terms of what they think would work. And so part of the Young African Leaders Initiative may be to elicit additional ideas from those—particularly those who may be working in education and have a sense of what are the barriers right now for young people in order to succeed.

Now, with respect to the so-called war on terror, there's no doubt that we've made some progress in dealing with some extremist groups—for example, core Al Qaida and bin Laden, that

was based in the FATA area between Pakistan and Afghanistan—that they have been greatly diminished. But what is also true is that in some ways, the problem has metastasized. You have more regional terrorist organizations, like a Boko Haram in Nigeria, espousing an extremist ideology, showing no regard for human life. And although they may not have the same transnational capacity that some of the earlier organizations did, they're doing great harm in Africa and in the Middle East and in South Asia.

People always talk about the terrorist threat to the United States or the West, but the truth of the matter is, is that the number of people who are killed by terrorist attacks in African countries or in Muslim countries or in South Asia, far outstrips any deaths that are experienced by Westerners. It's typically people right there where these organizations are based that are most likely to be killed. When the Kenya Embassy bombing happened, the overwhelming majority of people who were killed were Kenyans, not Americans. And so this is not just a problem for us, this is a problem for everybody.

Now, the question is, how do we address this problem? It is my strong belief that terrorism is more likely to emerge and take root where countries are not delivering for their people and where there are sources of conflict and underlying frustrations that have not been adequately dealt with. The danger we have right now, for example, in a place like Somalia is that it's been two generations, maybe three since there was a functioning government inside of Somalia. Now we've started to see actually some progress, in part because of intervention by African nations in Somalia to clear the space, to create the space for governance.

But you look at what's happening in Mali, for example, right now. Part of the problem is, is that you had a weak central government and democratic institutions that weren't reaching out as far into the country as were necessary, and we've got to build those institutions. A lot of what we talked about in terms of responsiveness and governance and democracy, those things become defense mechanisms against terrorism. They're the most important defense against terrorism.

So I don't start with the attitude of a military solution to these problems. I think the more that we're giving people opportunity, the more that we're giving people education, the more that we're helping resolve conflicts through regular democratic processes, the less likely they are to take root. Now, having said that, there are some extremist groups that will not compromise or work through a democratic process, and we have to also be realistic about that. And what we want to do is partner with African countries to figure out how we can help.

But I promise, this notion somehow that we want to somehow expand our military reach—I was elected to end a war. I've ended one. I'm now in the process of ending another one. Every few weeks, I go and visit soldiers who are your age, who have had their legs blown off in Afghanistan or worse. Every week, I'm writing letters to the families of fallen soldiers. Sometimes, I go to Arlington National Cemetery, where our heroes are buried, and I hug those families, and I feel their sobs on my shoulder.

This idea somehow that we want to get more involved militarily around the world is simply not true. First of all, it costs a lot of money, and the United States, just like every country around the world, has to think about its budget. And where we intervene, oftentimes, it's not very effective, because unless you've got a local population that is standing up against terrorism, we end up being viewed as interlopers and intruders.

So with—in the Africa context, what we want to do is to build African capacity. We want the African Union and other regional organizations to build up the capacity to send in peacekeepers, to be able to nip terrorist cells that may be forming before they start and gain strength. And we can provide advice and training and in some cases equipment, but we would love nothing more than for Africa collectively to say no to extremism, say no to terrorism, to say

no to sectarianism—which, in the case of Boko Haram, for example, is an example of essentially a religious rationale for this kind of violence—and the United States to be able to step back and worry about selling iPads and planes. That's what we would like to do.

But what we won't do is just stand by if our Embassy is being attacked or our people are in vulnerable situations. And we expect countries to work with us to try to deal with some of these threats. And this is a global issue; it's not just one related to the United States. Okay. All right.

Ms. Mabuse. We have time to take one last question from Soweto.

President Obama. If it's a really short question, I'll give a short answer, and we'll get two in. [Laughter] Gentleman right here, yes, go ahead. Everybody has got—you've got to describe why you're all wearing orange. [Laughter]

Education

Q. Okay. Firstly, my name is Hans Dinkelman. I'm nervous. [Laughter] I'm a student at UJ. I'm an honor student, also studied education. You said education people should stand up. [Laughter] My education is—oh, my question is we've got a lot of barriers in this country, and one of those barriers is the amount of students in our classes versus a single person. And what I find difficult is, how does that one person stand up and control, in some cases—we've just come back from training—some cases 90 to 100 kids in one class? It's difficult enough to carry 40 in my class. How do you carry those 90—I find it very difficult—and try to make an impact in their lives?

President Obama. Good. I think that's a great question. First of all, I think it's wonderful that you're going into education. Very proud of you. No job more important than educating our young people. This is a challenge that we have in the United States as well, and that is the issue of class size.

Now, our problem typically is that our class sizes are around 35 or 33, and we'd like to see if we can get it down in the twenties. If you're talking about 90—[laughter]—that's a whole other level. Now, we're—I'm assuming we're talking about primary and secondary education, we're not talking about universities, because by the time you get to university it's—you better be focused on your studies. It's not the job of the teacher to make you do your work and pay attention, because you're now an adult. But when it comes to young people, studies do show that particularly for poorer children, the more one-on-one attention that they can get from their teachers, the more personalized instruction they can get, the better they're going to do.

So the first response is, if you can budget—if a government can budget smaller class sizes, that's better. But not every country is going to have the resources to do that. And one of the things that we're starting to see in the United States is, how can you effectively use, for example, teacher's assistants in a class, who may not be fully certified teachers but can break up, let's say, a class of 90 into smaller groups. This is also where technology can also potentially make a difference, because it's conceivable that if you've got some sort of technology—a couple of laptops—that you can leverage one teacher into multiple instruction.

The question you raise, though, makes me want to suggest to my team when we leave here that we start taking some of the best practices and some of the things that we're learning in the United States and seeing if there may be some application we can—might be able to start some pilot programs here in South Africa to see if we can make an impact there.

Good. All right. Last question? One more. All right. All these folks have been so patient in the back, I don't want them to feel neglected. So the—this gentleman right here, because he seems very eager. Right here. Yes, yes, you right there. [Laughter] Go ahead. The—but you guys can—

feel free to stand together if you want, but—[laughter]—I'm only going to take a question from one of you. [Laughter] What's your name?

Q. My name is Sydney Mukumu. I'm from Limpopo. Thank you. President Obama, I met you in 2006. I was working for the Embassy.

President Obama. Excellent.

Environment/Climate Change

Q. Yes. I'm very much worried about some of United States international—I mean foreign policy, especially on the environment. President Obama, today I want you to tell these young leaders about the foreign policy of the United States on the environment.

President Obama. On the environment?

Q. Yes, because South Africa is facing the same problem. Whatever is happening in America, it's affecting us. Please tell these—this is your children—tell us today—[laughter]

President Obama. Yes.

Q. Just like people who are protesting outside, there are people who are crying, and now you must address them here—

President Obama. Okay, let's go.

Q.—and tell them outside what is happening. Make it clear, and then when you go back, you will have a safe trip. Thank you very much, President.

President Obama. I'm ready. I'm ready. I'm ready. [Laughter] I'll see if I can make it clear. U.S. environmental policy is something that I care deeply about. As some of you know, I grew up in Hawaii, one of the most beautiful places on Earth. And as a child, I was just taught to treasure what the Earth gives us and to make sure that we leave it for the next generation. And obviously, in a country like South Africa, with incredible beauty and natural resources, that same mentality about conserving the Earth and nurturing it to pass on to future generations, I think, applies here just as much as it does in the United States.

The biggest challenge we have environmentally—and it is an international challenge that we cannot solve alone—is the issue of climate change. There are other issues: dirty water, dirty air. But the truth is, is that we've made enormous progress over the last several years, over the last several decades in the United States. And if you come to the United States, environmental quality is pretty good. And internationally, we've promoted policies around how mercury is released into the environment, and how other poisons are released in the environment and how businesses have to be held to international standards in terms of worker safety. Those are areas where the United States have been at the forefront. We've been at the front of the line, not the back of the line when it comes to those issues.

But the existential challenge that we face has to do with a warming planet. And your generation is the one that's going to be the most severely affected. Now, the United States and other highly industrialized, developed countries over the last 50, 100 years have been pumping up carbon emissions into the atmosphere. And slowly, this has been building up and it is warming the planet, and we may be reaching a tipping point in which if we do not solve this problem soon, it will spin out of control and change weather patterns in ways that we can't anticipate, with drought, floods, much more severe natural disasters. And unfortunately, in those situations, it's often poorer countries that are affected the most by these changing climate patterns.

So I just gave a speech this past week on what the United States is going to do on our next phase of reducing our carbon emissions. The United States actually reduced our carbon emissions

more than any other country since I came into office. I just want to make that point. We doubled fuel efficiency standards on cars. We're investing in clean energy like solar and wind. And we actually want to share that technology, because we think that all countries need to benefit. And part of the opportunity for Africa is to see if we can leapfrog some of the polluting practices of America or Europe and go straight to the clean energy strategies that will allow you to advance economic growth, but not corrupt the planet.

So we've made progress, but we haven't done enough. And what I did was to say I challenge the United States. I said we've got to do more. We're going to start regulating our power plants more efficiently. We're going to make sure that we redouble our efforts to reduce our carbon emissions, and we're setting a goal to meet the agreements that we had both in Copenhagen and in Durban for advanced countries that have a big carbon footprint.

But let me make one last point: The United States cannot do it by itself. And the biggest emitter of carbon right now is China. They still have a much lower carbon footprint per person than the United States, but because they have so many people, it's going up rapidly. And Chinese leaders understand this. The same thing that's sending all the carbon into the atmosphere is also making it difficult to breathe in Beijing. So they recognize, they've got to come up with a new development model. India is going to have to come up with new development models—Africa.

We're going to all have to work together to find ways in which collectively, we reduce carbon, but we make sure that there's some differentiation so that countries that are very wealthy are expected to do more and countries that are still developing, obviously, they shouldn't be resigned to poverty simply because the West and Europe and America got there first. That wouldn't be fair. But everybody is going to have to do something. Everybody is going to have to make some important choices here. And I expect that it's going to be your generation that helps lead this, because if we don't, it's going to be your generation that suffers the most.

Ultimately, if you think about all the youth that everybody has mentioned here in Africa, if everybody is raising living standards to the point where everybody has got a car and everybody has got air conditioning and everybody has got a big house, well, the planet will boil over, unless we find new ways of producing energy. And tomorrow, or the next day, when I visit Tanzania, I'm actually going to be going to a power plant to focus on the need for electrification, but the need to do it in an environmentally sound way.

So let me just close by saying this has been an unbelievable conversation. I had a lot of faith in all of you before I came here; now I have even more faith in you. You guys are all going to do great things. I'll be retired by the time you do them, and so I'll just sit back and watch—*[laughter]*—and I'll be proud of you. But what I promise you is that the United States Government and the American people are going to want to be your partner for the duration of your careers. And I hope all of you, again, apply for the Young African Leaders Initiative. We want to hear from you about how we can work even more effectively with this great continent, because we see a bright future ahead.

I hope you've enjoyed it. Thank you, everybody. God bless you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:48 p.m. at the University of Johannesburg-Soweto. In his remarks, he referred to Archbishop Emeritus Desmond M. Tutu of Cape Town, South Africa; and Nimna Diayté, president, Saloum Federation of Corn Producers. The questioner from Nairobi, Kenya, referred to President Uhuru Kenyatta and Deputy President William Ruto of Kenya.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Young African Leaders Initiative, town hall meeting and question-and-answer session in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Locations: Johannesburg, South Africa.

Names: Bogapane, Lebogang; Diayté, Nimna; Jabari, Jacob; Mabuse, Nkepile; Mandela, Nelson R.; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Patel, Khadija; Sall, Macky; Swaniker, Fred; Tutu, Desmond M.; Zuma, Jacob.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Africa : African Union :: Governance and rule of law, strengthening efforts; Africa : African Union :: Peacekeeping efforts; Africa : African Union :: Trade and entrepreneurship, promotion efforts; Africa : Agricultural production :: Improvement efforts; Africa : Counterterrorism efforts, cooperation with U.S.; Africa : Democracy efforts; Africa : Economic growth and development; Africa : Government corruption, efforts to eliminate; Africa : International assistance; Africa : Job creation and growth; Africa : Regional trade, promotion efforts; Africa : Relations with China; Africa : Relations with U.S.; Africa : Student exchanges with U.S.; Africa : Trade with Europe; Africa : Trade with U.S.; Africa : Trade with U.S.; Africa : Women's rights; Armed Forces, U.S.: Servicemembers :: Casualties; Budget, Federal : Deficit and national debt; Commerce, international : Free and fair trade ; Criminal Court, International; Developing countries : Food security, strengthening efforts; Education : Class size, reduction efforts; Education : Early childhood education programs; Education : Foreign exchange programs ; Education : Global competitiveness; Education : Postsecondary education :: Community colleges; Education : Teachers; Education : Technology and innovation, expansion efforts; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: Promotion efforts; Energy : Carbon dioxide emissions, reduction; Energy : Developing countries, energy sources; Energy : Fuel efficiency standards, strengthening efforts; Energy : Greenhouse gas emissions, regulation; Environment : Carbon emissions; Environment : Climate change; Environment : Quality and improvement efforts; Kenya : 1998 U.S. Embassy bombing in Nairobi; Kenya : Democracy efforts; Mali : Political unrest and violence ; Nigeria : Boko Haram terrorist group; Pakistan : Federally Administered Tribal Areas, suspected terrorist safe havens; Senegal : President; Somalia : Terrorism; South Africa : HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment strategy; South Africa : President; South Africa : President Obama's visit; South Africa : Young African Leaders Initiative, meeting in Johannesburg; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Terrorism : Counterterrorism efforts; Terrorism : Global threat; Young African Leaders Initiative, President's.

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