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Remarks Following a Meeting With Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon of the United Nations

March 10, 2009

President Obama. Well, let me just say that I am very grateful for the Secretary-General taking the time to visit with us today. As I've said previously, I think the United Nations can be an extraordinarily constructive, important partner in bringing about peace and stability and security to people around the world. And the Secretary-General has shown extraordinary leadership during his tenure as Secretary-General.

We had a wide-ranging conversation. There are a host of international issues that we both agree have to be addressed. We talked about the economic crisis and how that's affecting not only developed countries, but very poor countries around the world, and the potential threat to food supplies if it continues to worsen, and the need for international coordination.

We discussed the issue of Afghanistan, where the Secretary-General has been very helpful in bringing together a donors conference. We're going to be talking about how we can ramp up and better coordinate civilian activities in Afghanistan so that we can be more effective in that region. And we also talked about the upcoming elections in Afghanistan.

We discussed Haiti and the concerns that we both have about a long-suffering country that's just gone through a terrible crisis as a consequence of hurricanes.

And one of the things that we spent I think the most time talking about was the issue of Darfur. As many of you are aware, we have a ongoing crisis in Darfur that has heightened recently, where the Khartoum Government has kicked out some of the most important nongovernmental organizations that provide direct humanitarian aid to millions of people who've been internally displaced in the Sudan. And we have a potential crisis of even greater dimensions than what we already saw.

I impressed upon the Secretary-General how important it is from our perspective to send a strong, unified, international message that it is not acceptable to put that many people's lives at risk; that we need to be able to get those humanitarian organizations back on the ground; and that the United States wants to work as actively as possible with the United Nations to try to resolve the immediate humanitarian crisis and to start putting us on a path for long-term peace and stability in the Sudan.

And this is something that the United States Secretary to the United Nations, Secretary Rice, has been working on diligently. It's something that we care about deeply. And we're hopeful that we can make some significant progress.

Last point that I would make is, Secretary Ban has spoken extensively about the issue of climate change, and as all of you know, this is something that my administration is deeply concerned about as well. We welcome his leadership. And we're looking forward to working with some of the major countries involved to figure out how, even in the midst of economic crisis, we can move forward and prevent what could be longer-term ecological crises that could have a tremendously adverse effect on the international economy if we don't take action.

Secretary-General Ban. Thank you very much, Mr. President. I'm very much honored to meet you and discuss on all the matters of our mutual concern and interest between the United Nations and the United States.

It's a very encouraging sign coming from your office to the United Nations that we are meeting at such an early stage of your administration. And I count on your great leadership. United Nations and United States share common visions and objectives for peace and stability, development and human rights. As Secretary-General of the United Nations, you can count on me, my full commitment and working together with you.

I think year 2009 is a make-or-break year, full of crises on many fronts, for United Nations, for United States, and whole international community as a whole. For that, we need to work very closely to address all the issues. I have been closely following with a deepest admiration what you have been taking, demonstrating great leadership, very dynamic and visionary, to overcome this international economic crisis. I welcome your very strong national stimulus packages, and I'm also looking forward to meeting you and discussing with you and other leaders at G–20 summit meeting in London.

What I'd like to emphasize, as Secretary-General of the United Nations, is that leaders of G–20 should not lose sight of the challenges and plight of hundreds of hundreds of millions of poorest of people of the developing countries who have been impacted by this economic crisis.

The leaders of industrialized countries should keep their commitment on Millennium Development Goals and official development assistance and help developing countries overcome in food security and also help them to adapt and mitigate climate change.

Climate change, as, Mr. President, you have said, is a priority for the United Nations and for whole international community. I am going to focus and work together with the leaders of the world to address this issue, to unlock all this massive investment for the green economic recovery and also to save our planet. This is an issue of our era. I count on your strong commitment and leadership. Whole world is now looking at your leadership. And I'm willing to—I'm committed to work together with you.

We have discussed, as President Obama just mentioned, on many issues, starting from Afghanistan, Sudan, and Iraq and Pakistan, and disarmament, and nonproliferation issues like North Korean nuclear issues. And on all of these issues, we—I'm committed to work together with you. I count on your leadership.

United Nations stands ready to work together with you, Mr. President, to make this make-or-break year turn into make-it-work, full of optimism and resolution. And thank you very much, Mr. President.

President Obama. Thank you so much, Mr. Secretary.

Secretary-General Ban. Thank you, sir.

President Obama. Thank you, everybody. Appreciate it.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:23 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

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