

February 8, 2008: Weekly Washington Update

Greetings from our Nation's Capital

I thought this week I would give you a report on some events occurring in Africa and the role I have taken in those events as a member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

You may have heard that Kenya, who emerged as a democracy in 1992, held general elections this past December. President Mwai Kibaki was challenged by two other candidates, Kalonzo Musyoka and Raila Odinga. After what appeared to be a peaceful and successful process, it initially seemed as though Odinga was to become the next President of Kenya. Despite numerous allegations of voter fraud and irregularities the Electoral Commission declared President Kibaki the victor and quickly swore him into office.

The apparent election fraud plunged the nation into crisis and bloodshed, with nearly 1,000 killed and thousands more displaced from their homes.

This week, the crisis was the focal point of hearings held on Capital Hill. As a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health I participated in those hearings and heard directly from members of the Kenyan diplomatic envoy about what is going on in that country and what is being done to end the violence.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State James Swan testified about the position our government is taking in this crisis and I had the opportunity to ask him a number of questions about how we can best move Kenya towards a peaceful resolution.

My first question was to what extent will accountability for the violence that has occurred be important in moving towards reconciliation? I believe that this is important in that often when violence occurs in a political process both sides in the dispute are unable to look past what they perceive as grievances against them and their supporters.

I also took the opportunity to ask him about the possibility of a power-sharing agreement that would reduce tensions. He answered that essentially both sides must agree to end the violence, look past the transgressions of the past few weeks and work together to form a government that allows all sides to feel as though they are part of the democratic process.

With the help of Kofi Annan, former U.N. Secretary General, the Kenyans are moving towards a power-sharing agreement today. Recognizing that neither side could proceed on their own, they sat down with Mr. Annan to form a power-sharing government, in the hopes of ending the bloodshed and restoring peace to this great nation.

There is still much work to be done though. Civil strife often does not just go away because political solutions are worked out. I believe that it may still take months to restore peace in this nation and that both sides must continue to work together to find common ground.

My role was to ask the tough questions and hold people accountable for their actions. By participating in the hearings this past week, and later voting for a resolution on the House floor calling for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, I hope that I was able to help in my own way.

I will be watching closely in the coming weeks and months to make sure that the new Kenyan government continues to do what it has promised to do and I look forward to the day when our great ally Kenya can return to peace and democracy.

